

In Those Days Israel Had No King

Judges 13:1-5 (chapters 13-16) ¹

The small island of Igloolik, well beyond the Arctic Circle in northern Canada, is a difficult place, especially in the winter. During winter, the average temperature hovers at about 20 degrees below zero. Thick sheets of sea ice cover the surrounding waters, and the sun is rarely seen.

Despite these brutal conditions, Inuit (In-u-it) hunters have for some 4,000 years ventured out from their homes on the island and traveled across miles of ice and tundra to search for game. The hunters' ability to navigate vast stretches of the barren Arctic terrain, where landmarks are few, snow formations are in constant flux, and trails disappear overnight, has amazed explorers and scientists for centuries. The Inuit's extraordinary way-finding skills grew out of their profound understanding of winds, snowdrift patterns, animal behavior, stars, and tides.

But, recently, with the advent of GPS, younger hunters have begun to prefer current technology to the ancient ways. The results of this change are worrisome. A hunter who hasn't developed way-finding skills can easily become lost, particularly if the batteries in his GPS receiver fail. Perhaps worse, following routes plotted by GPS can give hunters tunnel vision, leading them onto thin ice or into other hazards a skilled navigator would avoid—the kinds of things your GPS sometimes does to you on the highway.

Like city dwellers who walk into things with their eyes glued to their phones, the Inuit are losing a unique and life-saving ability that has been theirs for millennia.² As they ignore the signs God has built into the fabric of our planet, the younger Inuit are moving from deep wisdom to cluelessness, and it is “cluelessness” that claims our attention this morning.

There was a difficult period of about 350 years between Joshua's death and the inauguration of Saul as Israel's first king. During these years, the nation's leadership consisted of a succession of twelve Judges who represented God with widely-varying degrees of holiness and success. You've likely heard of Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson, but you may not be so familiar with Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon.

As we arrive at the book of Judges in our journey through the Bible, the essential thrust of the book can be captured by two verses that serve as “bookends” to the story:

Judges 2:10

¹⁰ After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel.

Judges 21:25

²⁵ In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.

You may remember that the basic outline of Judges repeats a five-part cycle many times: (1) the people commit spiritual rebellion and apostasy; (2) God brings judgment on the people in various ways; (3) God raises up a judge (4) who leads the people to repentance and renewal; (5) the people live under God's blessing for a time but soon lapse into rebellion and apostasy once more (Judges 2:18-19).

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on August 4, 2019.

² Adapted from Nicholas Carr, “All Can Be Lost: The Risk of Putting Our Knowledge in the Hands of Machines,” *The Atlantic*, November 2013.

The last, and probably the best-known of the twelve judges, was Samson; and I've been surprised to discover that I've never done a sermon on Samson before. Samson was both the last and worst of the judges, and he probably lived at about the same time as Samuel, who was the first of the prophets (c. 1075-1055 BCE).

This was a time when Israel was harassed and oppressed by the Philistines. The Philistines were a seacoast people who were fierce warriors who had learned how to work iron into weapons and chariots and who outnumbered the people of Israel. They oppressed Israel for more than forty years, until David vanquished them.

Samson's life began with great hope. Samson was a miracle child announced by an angel to his mother and father—as would later happen with Samuel, John the Baptist, and Jesus, among others.³ Fully a quarter of Samson's entire story is spent on the buildup to his birth, so it makes sense to assume that after his miraculous birth announcement, he would have a life and ministry to match; but sadly, such was not to be. Although the angel told Samson's mother that her son would "*take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines*" (Judges 13:5), that overstated what Samson would actually accomplish.

The angel also told Samson's mother that her son was "*to be a Nazirite, dedicated to God from the womb*" (Judges 13:5). God had given Moses "the law of the Nazirite" long before in the wilderness.⁴ If a person chose to dedicate themselves to God as a Nazirite for some period of time, there were three requirements during the period of the vow: (1) a Nazirite could not drink wine or consume anything whatsoever from a grape vine, including grapes and seeds; (2) a Nazirite could not touch or go near a dead body of any sort, even that of a close family member; and (3) a Nazirite's hair could not be cut for the entire period of the vow.

Samson is the only person whom the Bible identifies as being a Nazirite, and his commitment was unusual in several ways.⁵ First of all, Samson did not make this commitment himself. The angel instructed his mother to make this commitment for him. Second, this commitment was not time-limited, but was to be for Samson's entire life; and most significantly, Samson violated all three terms of his commitment, two of them several times.

Although Samson's life began in great expectation, his birth was really the high-water mark of his story, and it was pretty much downhill from there. Samson's life was consecrated to God, but his life was bereft of godly character. We remember him, not for what he did, but for what he might have been.

From the start, Samson was impulsive, spoiled, demanding, arrogant, and lacking judgment. He was clueless. He showed no hint of kindness or love or any evidence of a life stirred by God's Spirit. He was cruel and vindictive, incapable of discernment and immune to advice. He married into the families of the Philistines—the very people who were Israel's worst enemies, not once, but twice. As Samson disregarded every warning and all counsel, violence, revenge and disappointment became the constant themes of his life.

Samson may have been the first example of a Narcissistic Personality Disorder in Scripture, and he was a textbook case. Narcissists overstate their own importance and consider

³ That Manoah's wife is barren and is promised a child immediately calls to mind other barren women and the divine promises made to them: Sarah ([Genesis 11:30](#); [18:9-15](#); [21:1-7](#)), Rebekah ([Genesis 25:21-26](#)), Rachel ([Genesis 29:31](#); [30:22-24](#); [35:16-20](#)), and Hannah ([1 Samuel 1:1-28](#)). The sons of these women are among the most important and heroic of Old Testament figures: Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Samuel.

⁴ Numbers 6:1-21

⁵ Samuel may have been a Nazirite, but this is not clearly stated (1 Samuel 1:11).

themselves to be both indispensable and worthy of special rights and privileges. When opposed, narcissists become furious and cast blame and aspersion on everyone around them.

Narcissists infuriate those around them, and their excessive pride causes those who are the targets of their wrath to devote themselves to seeing the narcissist humiliated. While thinking themselves sophisticated and shrewd, narcissists are actually much more gullible than the average person.

Because of all their blaming, narcissists are frequently betrayed by the very people they think they can trust. And finally, narcissists are convinced that they are destined for greatness, so when they are crossed, they react with revenge and violence. Such is the Samson we meet in the book of Judges.

Sadly, Samson was the “hero” Israel deserved. For hundreds of years, the people of Israel had gone their own way, abandoning the promises they had made to God, worshipping idols, practicing injustice, and running after pagan gods. Like Israel, the nation he was supposed to guide, Samson chose to follow the guidance of his carnal desires rather than following the guidance of God’s Law through Moses; and so, rather than being a story of hope, Samson’s story is really a hopeless story in three acts.

These three acts revolve around Samson’s pursuit of three different women, and they tell a sordid and salacious tale of violence, retribution, and revenge. If there is a hero in this story, it is really Samson’s mother, who, though unnamed, is the only person in the story who seems fully committed to following God’s Ways.⁶

Time will only permit me to note key events in Samson’s story this morning. I encourage you to read the whole thing for yourself this afternoon. You can find it in Judges 13-16.

ACT ONE. We know nothing of Samson’s life from his birth until he was old enough to marry. Then, rather than choosing a wife from his own people, Samson chose a young woman who was a Philistine—from that very nation from whose oppression he was supposed to be delivering Israel. When his parents objected, Samson’s response literally was “she is right in my eyes” (Judges 14:3). The narrator’s choice of words anticipates the final verse of the book, which we’ve already noted: *“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes”* (Judges 21:25).

You’ll have to read the story for yourself, but the spoiler for Act One is that Act One ends with Samson’s wife being burned to death by her own people as an act of revenge . . . an act of revenge taken in response to Samson’s prior act of revenge. One theme of Samson’s life story is well summarized by Dr. King’s famous statement that “An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.”

ACT TWO. The second act of Samson’s story is the shortest—only three verses. While Act Two includes another amazing feat of physical strength, it centers on Samson’s visit to a prostitute in the town of Gaza. Gaza was the Philistine town most distant from Samson’s home, which serves as a parable of how far Samson was from the purposes of God. Like a modern Inuit hunter, he was lost in the wilderness and did not know the way home.

ACT THREE. Act Three of Samson’s story is the best-known. This is the story of Samson & Delilah—a third Philistine woman. Because of the destruction Samson had brought on the

⁶ The role reversal performed by [Judges 13](#), and indeed by the portrayal of women elsewhere in the book of Judges, anticipates the role reversals performed by Jesus and his announcement and embodiment of the reign of God, in which the last shall be first and the greatest among us will be a servant. Not unlike [Judges 13](#), Jesus had a way of making unnamed women into heroes (see [Mark 14:3–9](#)).

Philistines in his various acts of revenge, when the rulers of the five major Philistine cities learned that Samson was pursuing Delilah, they offered her 5,500 shekels of silver if she made it possible for them to subdue and capture him.

This was a fantastic amount of money that would have weighed 700 pounds. In order to appreciate 5,500 shekels, it helps to know that a slave could be purchased in those days for 30 shekels. Delilah saw “dollar signs,” and she quickly began her work of seduction.

The truth of the matter is that Delilah was not at all subtle about her goal. She asked Samson to “*Tell me the secret of your great strength and how you can be tied up and subdued*” (Judges 16:6). Samson would have had to have been a complete fool to miss what she was doing—and though he did fit most of the biblical descriptions of a “fool,”⁷ it seems more likely that he chose to string Delilah along and see how close he could get to the truth without actually revealing it.

Once again, you’ll have to read the story for yourself; but in the end, Delilah so pestered Samson that he revealed to her the only part of the Nazirite vow that he had not broken. He had never, ever cut his hair. And so, as Esau had “despised his birthright” long before,⁸ so Samson despised the consecration that had been put upon his life, and in so doing, lost it.

After all this, we need to ask ourselves, “**So What?**” Is there *anything good* we can learn from Samson’s story? I’m glad you asked.

One thing we can clearly see in Samson is the reality of the human condition, first stated in Genesis 8:21, that “*every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood.*” That was certainly true of Samson, and though you and I may be more subtle in our wickedness, it’s quite often true of us, as well.

A second lesson from Samson’s life is the destructive power of sexuality when it is divorced from God’s purposes. God’s gift of sexual expression can be one of the best gifts of physical existence, but it can also be the door to death.⁹

Sexual sin doesn’t “just happen.” Like all sin, sexual sin begins in the mind, and holiness begins in the mind as well. That’s why Paul told us, “*Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will*” (Romans 12:2).

A third lesson I’d like to suggest from Samson’s life is the way in which he lived by a deadly ancient motto with which we are also familiar. The way this motto is put in Scripture goes like this: “*In those days there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in his own eyes*” (Judges 21:25). The way it’s put today is more succinct: “You deserve it.” “Just do it.”

You may not be particularly tempted by sexual sin, though the fact that pornography is easily available on your phone makes things a lot more complicated. You may be more tempted by selfishness, or bitterness, or greed, or covetousness, or anger. But whatever your “besetting sin” may be, you may be sure that Satan, your Adversary, knows what it is. Satan “knows where your goat is tied,” and it is his constant goal to “get your goat.” So another important lesson from Samson’s story is, “*What are you doing to guard your goat?*”

⁷ See Proverbs 10:1, 23, 13:20, 15:20, 17:12, 25, 18:6, 19:13, 29:11.

⁸ Genesis 25:34

⁹ See Proverbs 2:16-19, 5:1-23

Remember the lesson of the Inuit: those who ignore the guidance God has provided or who allow their knowledge of that guidance to grow dim are very likely to find themselves in the wilderness, in danger, and facing death. We need to keep reminding ourselves that the purpose of God's guidance in Scripture is not to restrict our joy, but to make our joy complete.

The last thing we'll note about Samson is the way he illustrates the truth that "God can hit a straight lick with a crooked stick." Samson wasted his life. He could have strengthened his nation. He could have returned Israel to the worship of Yahweh. He could have wiped out the Philistines. But even though he did none of those things, Samson still accomplished at least some of the purpose announced by the angel who visited his parents before his birth. According to some translations, the angel told Samson's mother that her son would "*begin to rescue Israel from the Philistines*" (Judges 13:5), and through his final act of revenge that brought about his own death, Samson did, in fact, *begin* that process.¹⁰

It's interesting that the New Testament doesn't mention Samson's failures or his incredible feats of strength. The one time the New Testament mentions him, in Hebrews 11:32-34, Samson is simply listed with others who "*conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised.*" In the end—the last moments of his life—Samson recognized his dependence on God . . . at least a little bit.

If we look long enough, perhaps we can see in Samson a hint of the spiritual truth that it is never too late to return to God. Whatever our past has been like, and even if our remaining days are short, if we're still breathing, God can still redeem our lives and use us to help bring in the Kingdom of Light—if we ask for those mercies and are genuinely open to receiving them.

All this reminds me of an old English hymn by Arthur Ainger:¹¹

God is working His purpose out as year succeeds to year;
 God is working His purpose out, and the time is drawing near;
 Nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be,
 When the earth shall be filled with the glory of God
 As the waters cover the sea.

All that we do can have no worth, unless God bless the deed;
 Vainly we hope for the harvest-tide, till God gives life to the seed;
 Yet nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be,
 When the earth shall be filled with the glory of God
 As the waters cover the sea.

Let us go forth in the strength of God, with the banner of Christ unfurled,
 That the light of the glorious gospel of truth may shine throughout the world:
 Let us all fight with sorrow and sin, to set their captives free,
 That the earth may be filled with the glory of God,
 As the waters cover the sea.

Let's roll.

¹⁰ Fred Smith, "Why God Still Works Through Fools Like Samson," *Christianity Today*, February, 2018. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/march/why-god-still-works-through-fools-like-samson.html>

¹¹ Arthur Campbell Ainger, "God Is Working His Purpose Out" (1894), based on Habakkuk 2:14 and Philippians 2:12-13.