

You Really Need a King:

Samson: A Savior is Born? (Judges 13:1-25)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on October 23, 2016

Introduction

- ❖ Some people are said to be born with a silver spoon in their mouths. That's an idiom for being born into wealth or a privileged background. You have everything handed to you on a platter. You have every advantage, every privilege availed to you. You're set up for success. That's what it means to be born with a silver spoon.
 - ▶ **And that's Samson. He was born with a silver spoon.** He wasn't necessarily born into wealth, but he certainly was born with every spiritual advantage in his favor. He was set up for success. Just compare him to any judge we've already encountered.

- ❖ Think back to the last two. Consider **Gideon**. He thought the angel of the LORD made a mistake in choosing him. He argued that he was of the weakest clan in his tribe and he was the least in his own father's house (6:15). He's the last guy you'd expect to be a judge.
 - ▶ And last week we saw how **Jephthah** was even worse off, even more disadvantaged. We were told that he was the son of a prostitute, who was initially driven away and exiled by his own brothers. He had to raise himself without any family.
 - Now in both their stories there are some high points and reasons to be hopeful, but sadly both their stories end in shame and disappointment.

- ❖ So imagine what readers are supposed to think when we get to chapter 13. We're finally introduced to a judge with a good pedigree. Who's the firstborn of a relatively godly couple, who would be conceived miraculously, whose birth was announced by the angel of the LORD himself not just once but twice, who is promised to be the one to save Israel from the hand of their enemies. **There is a lot of hype, a lot of promise, surrounding the birth of this baby boy. That really only happens a few times in Scripture.**
 - ▶ That's why I'm saying Samson was born with a silver spoon. So you'd think things will be different this time. Things are on the up and up. The days have been dark and gloomy and getting worse in the book of Judges. But here comes Samson whose name, by the way, means "little sun". Isn't that sweet? **Some would describe this little boy a little ray of hope shining bright against a dark, despairing backdrop.**
 - But of that hope comes crashing down once you read on into chapters 14, 15, and 16. **In the tragic end, the reader is faced with the harsh reality that even the most spiritually advantaged among us – with the silver-est of spoons – can't even deliver himself, let alone God's people.**

- ❖ This is a reality we all need to face. **Many of you were born with a silver spoon – not in the monetary sense – but in the spiritual.** You were born into a Christ-honoring family, into a gospel-preaching church, with the Bible being read to you as far back as you can remember. You're spiritually advantaged. And you rely on that too much.
 - ▶ **But then there are those of us who don't have a spiritual, let alone Christian, background.** We didn't have parents who have a strong and vibrant faith of their own. We didn't have a spiritual community shaping us in our formative years. We feel like we're at a spiritual disadvantage. And we despair over that too much.

- ❖ So this is what this morning's passage teaches: **If the most spiritually-advantaged among us can't rise above their own sins and troubles to deliver themselves, then there's no use boasting or despairing in ourselves.** Our only hope is to look beyond ourselves to God and to another baby boy that he'll bring into the world.
 - ▶ Let's go through this birth narrative by considering three movements within the story. First, we're introduced to a people shrouded in darkness. Second, we hear good news of great joy about a child of promise. But thirdly, we're brought back down to earth with a harsh reality check.

A People Shrouded in Darkness

- ❖ Let's begin by considering the context (the backdrop) behind Samson's birth. **We see a people shrouded in darkness.** The chapter starts off that way. Look in v1, "*And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD gave them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years.*"
 - ▶ In the Hebrew, the sentence begins with the word "*again*" suggesting that's where the emphasis lies. *Again* they did what was evil in the sight (lit. eyes) of the LORD. **In fact, this is now the seventh time in the book where it says the people of Israel did what was evil in God's eyes** (cf. 2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6).
- ❖ The mention of eyes shows up two more times in the book. In chapter 17:6 and chapter 21:25, the exact same phrase is repeated, "*In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes* (in their own sight)."
 - ▶ So put that together. The people were doing what looked right in their own sight but it was actually evil in the sight of the LORD. **What was evil in the eyes of God seemed right in their own eyes.**
- ❖ That just demonstrates the depths of human depravity. **Sin has so deceived our hearts that we think we're doing good when we're actually doing evil.** Let's be real. We usually don't sin by thinking, "Hmm I want to do some evil right now." No, we think we're doing the right thing. We're convinced that our actions are right. That what we said was the right thing to say. That was the right attitude to have and the right emotion to feel. **But what we learn in Judges is that in those occasions where we're utterly convinced we're doing what's good and right, we could actually be doing what's evil and wrong in the sight of the LORD.** Sin is that deceptive.
 - ▶ This is why we can't be our own judges. Why we can't be left to ourselves to interpret our own actions. We need a Judge who stands apart and stands above us. **We need a Law greater than our own conscience or else we can justify just about anything.**
 - If morality is in the eye of the beholder, if right and wrong (good and evil) are self-determined realities, then there's no such thing as "right and wrong" or "good and evil". **There are only preferences.** My preference. Your preference. Our society's preference. Their society's preference. It's great when they all align, but we're discovering these days that such alignments are much less frequent.

- ❖ But common sense tells us this can't be true. You don't even need the Bible to disprove this way of conceiving morality. Just ask yourself, ***"Is there anyone right now in the world doing something that you believe they should stop doing no matter how convinced that what they're doing is right in their own eyes?"***
 - ▶ You should be able to at least name one thing. Hopefully far more. The genocidal slaughter of men, women, and children? Sexual assaults? Acts of terror? Gun violence? Human trafficking? If you can't tell me that those things are evil – that they need to stop – no matter if the perpetrators think what they're doing is right, then we've got a problem. I'll do my best to love and respect you, but honestly I would not want you as a neighbor. And you definitely can't babysit my kid. Because that's how a sociopath thinks: "It's all good as long as it's right in your own eyes."

- ❖ You know that's not right. **We know that, in the end, we can't be the final Judge.** But when sin gets the best of us, it shrouds our thinking in darkness. We don't think straight. We don't perceive clearly. And we begin to conflate what's right in our eyes with what's right in God's. That's a scary place to be. That's where the Israelites found themselves in chapter 13.

- ❖ Notice as well how, after the mention of subjecting them under the heavy hand of a foreign oppressor, **the typical mention of Israel crying out to the LORD is notably absent** (cf. 3:9, 15; 6:6; 10:10). We've said before that their cries for help should not be interpreted as cries of genuine repentance but just the cry of someone in deep distress. It's more like a yelp – a sharp cry of pain. They were seeking relief and not necessarily repentance.
 - ▶ **But sin has so shrouded their hearts and minds with darkness, that by this point the Israelites were no longer crying out for help.** Oppression, subjugation, hardship, sorrow – these became the new normal. Things got so bad that the Israelites eventually grew desensitized to their misery. They acclimated to their afflictions.

- ❖ Again that's a scary place to be. **To be so hardened, so calloused to your sin and its unbearable consequences, that you just get used to it.** You acclimate to your afflictions, and you no longer cry out to God for help.
 - ▶ I'm afraid some of you are in that place or on the verge of fully acclimating. You're living in disobedience to God. You're suffering the consequences. You used to at least feel some degree of conviction. You're conscience still pricked you. But now you're on the verge of fully acclimating. Living in disobedience has become the new normal.
 - You're not even crying out to God anymore. But as this chapter makes obvious – **your hardness doesn't harden the heart of God.** You might not be willing to do anything, but God still wills to mercifully act in your life.

A Child of Great Promise

- ❖ That's what we can draw from the fact that no crying out to God is mentioned and yet he still mercifully raises up a deliverer. In fact, this time he grows one from scratch. This is our second movement. **We go from a people shrouded in darkness to a sudden glimmer of hope in the birth announcement of a child of great promise.**

- ❖ We're introduced to an Israelite from the tribe of Dan named Manoah whose wife we're told is barren and childless. That's meant to draw immediate sympathy. Infertility is a painful experience for any couple. It's an experience of overwhelming pain, disappointment, bitterness, and shame.
 - ▶ **And though I know how hard it is in our day, being barren was much worse in the Old Testament.** Being fruitful and multiplying was part of the central drama in the book of Genesis. God makes a covenant to bless Abraham and his line. They'll become a great nation through whom all the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen. 12:2-3). But that requires offspring. Having children is vital to preserving the line of Abraham until the seed of Eve would be born, the chosen Messiah who would secure the blessing to all nations.

- ❖ **So by the time we get to the book of Deuteronomy, having children becomes a mark of covenantal blessing and indicator of your covenant faithfulness.** In chapter 7, Moses says if you keep the commands and do them, then the Lord, *“will love you, bless you, and multiply you. He will also bless the fruit of your womb.”* (Deut. 7:13)
 - ▶ And in the blessings and curses section of the Law in chapter 28, we read, *“if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God . . . Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb. . . . But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD . . . Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb.”* (Deut. 28:1, 4, 16, 18)

- ❖ **So if you're an Israelite who is barren and without children, it was assumed that you were cursed. You must be under the heavy hand of God's judgment.** So you can imagine the shame and confusion felt by Manoah and his wife.
 - ▶ But then in v3 his wife is visited by an angelic messenger. And not just any angelic being. This is the angel of the LORD. We saw him back in Gideon's storyline, and there we discovered that the angel of the LORD is none other than the LORD himself appearing in a theophany. **This is God bringing glad tidings of great joy.** The barren woman is promised that she will conceive and bear a son.

- ❖ You do realize just how rare this is, right? It happens only a few other times in Scripture. Abraham's barren wife **Sarah** is visited by angels and promised her son, Issac (Gen. 18:14). Later the book of 1 Samuel starts by recounting Samuel's birth and how his barren mother **Hannah** prayed for a son and mercifully received one (1 Sam. 1:20). Then in 2 Kings 4, God promises a son through Elisha to a barren **Shunammite woman** (2 Kg. 4:16). And then it's not until we get to the New Testament that we're introduced to Zechariah and his barren wife **Elizabeth**, and we're told how he meets an angel of the LORD who announces the birth of their son John the Baptist (Lk. 1:13).
 - ▶ **My point is that great expectations are now in place. The coming of a child means the going of shame.** The shame that hung over Manoah's wife will finally be removed. She will finally bear a son. Glimmers of hope are shining.

- ❖ Now specific instructions are given regarding this promised child. In vv4-5 it says he shall be raised as a Nazirite to God. In Numbers 6, we're introduced to this idea of a **Nazirite vow**. If an Israelite wanted to make a special vow to consecrate himself in service to the LORD, he would take on a Nazirite vow. Nazirite means separated or consecrated.
 - ▶ Essentially it requires three things. Those under a Nazirite vow must a) refrain from drinking wine, really anything from the grapevine, b) refrain from cutting their hair for duration of the vow, and c) refrain from any contact with a dead body (6:1-8). **If you violate any of these stipulations, you break the vow, and you're no longer consecrated in God's service.** You have to make a new vow.

- ❖ Now the uniqueness in this case is that normally Nazirite vows are voluntary, but Samson's placed under this vow from a prenatal state. Even in utero his mother needs to refrain from wine since he'll be affected by whatever she eats or drinks. And the vow Samson is under appears to last for a lifetime, while most Nazirite vows are only temporary until the duty or time period is complete.
 - ▶ **So the point is that this is a Nazirite like none other. He is set apart and consecrated to the LORD to a degree greater than any other before him.** As readers, we're supposed to be impressed. We're supposed to have high hopes for this baby boy. Surely he's going to do amazing things for the LORD.
 - And that's what the angel of the LORD promises in v5, *"for behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines."*

- ❖ And then we read by the end of the chapter in v24, *"²⁴And the woman bore a son and called his name Samson. And the young man grew, and the LORD blessed him. ²⁵And the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him."*
 - ▶ Again high hopes are on the rise. Not to many characters in Scripture are described as being blessed with the Spirit of the LORD stirring in you. **Could this be the Deliverer we've been hoping for?** The One that all the previous judges failed to be? Maybe it did take growing one from scratch. If you set apart the judge from conception, in utero, maybe then it'll work.

A Harsh Reality Check

- ❖ But then things come to a crashing halt as we arrive at the third movement of the story: a harsh reality check. Even with all the hype, even with all the lofty expectations, **we see undeniable signs that this is not the judge you're looking for.**

- ❖ How so? **First of all, notice how the promise of deliverance through Samson is only partial.** It's easily missed if you're not paying close attention. Look back at v5. Notice how it only says that he will *begin* to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines. He'll begin the deliverance but he won't be the one to finish it.

- ❖ We were told back in v1 that they were given into the hand of the Philistines for forty years. And we know that, after Samson's death, the Philistines are still around and they continue to harass Israel during the reigns of Saul and David. It's only until we get to 2 Samuel 8 that we read of David defeating the Philistines and subduing them. **So that word "begin" should signal to us that Samson is bound to disappoint.**
- ❖ **The reaction of his parents, particularly his father, also signals disappointment.** When Manoah's wife tells him about the angelic visit and the promise of a son, he's hesitant to believe and prays for a second visit so he can hear the message himself. But it's really unnecessary. We don't learn anything new from the second angelic visit. It just serves to delay the plot and reveals Manoah's hardness of heart.
 - ▶ **It's been noted that his effort in v15 to detain his divine visitor with a meal likely had an ulterior motive.** Among Ancient Near Eastern religions, there was a common belief that feeding a deity (offering hospitality) could curry favor and even obligate the deity to grant a request or act on your behalf. If that's true, then Manoah was trying to secure a guarantee. **He was trying to get the angelic visitor in his pocket. To leverage a degree of control over him.**
- ❖ Asking for the visitor's name in v17 was another attempt to accomplish the same thing. **Ancient Near Eastern peoples believed that knowing the name of a heavenly being gave you some degree of power or influence over that being.** So if the meal didn't work, then Manoah will try to manipulate his angelic guest by learning his name. It's the same reason why Jacob – when he was wrestling with God before he knew it was God – asked for his opponent's name (Gen. 32:39).
- ❖ But just like in Jacob's case, the angel of the LORD questioned back asking, "Why do you want to know?" But the LORD knows exactly why Manoah wants to know. To put me in your pocket. To have some kind of leverage over me. To obligate me to you.
 - ▶ So the angel of the LORD refuses to comply, and once the meal is sacrificed on a rock, we read, "*And when the flame went up toward heaven from the altar, the angel of the LORD went up in the flame of the altar. Now Manoah and his wife were watching, and they fell on their faces to the ground.*" (13:20)
- ❖ Now at this point, Manoah is mortified because he realizes he was trying to gain leverage on Yahweh himself. He says to his wife in v22, "*We shall surely die, for we have seen God.*" **But she has enough sense to know that if God wanted them dead, they'd be dead already.** But if he has grand plans regarding a son who has yet to even be conceived, then why would God tell us these things only to kill us right after. So she talks some sense into her husband.

- ❖ And then we're in v24 that soon after she bore a son and called his name Samson, which again means "little sun". **And that's cute and all, until you realize that it probably comes from the name of the Canaanite sun god (*Shemesh*)**. And so these high expectations of this promised child coming to save the day are quickly dashed. The sunny picture being painted is suddenly covered by storm clouds of despair. Like I said, this is a harsh reality check.
- ❖ Samson virtually has every spiritual advantage going for him. And yet it's not enough. He'll grow up to be a great disappointment. Oh he'll have the last laugh against his enemies, but he's no hero. In fact, he's probably one of the first antiheroes in ancient literature.
 - ▶ **Samson ends up pushing Israel further down the spiral they've been on throughout Judges, and pushing our exceptions forward to another day and another deliverer in Scripture with another spectacular birth.**
- ❖ Once we get to the New Testament, to the Gospel of Matthew, we're introduced to another story of an angelic visitor promising another woman that she will miraculously conceive and bear a son of great promise who will grow up to deliver his people.
 - ▶ **But if you think about it, in Jesus' birth narrative, the miracle is even greater.** It's even more amazing. Because in Samson's case, as miraculous as it is for a barren woman to conceive, at least she conceived through natural means with her husband. But in Mary's case, she conceives even without a husband, without a man!
 - **But not only is Jesus' birth far more miraculous, it's far more profound.** In the case of Manoah's wife (Sarah, Hannah, the Shunammite, or Elizabeth) the conception and birth of their child removed their shame. **But in the case of Mary and her son, they had to bear shame.** She was unmarried. I'm sure she tried to explain the concept of a virgin birth, but I doubt anyone in Nazareth was buying it.
- ❖ This points us to the deeper significance behind the birth of Christ. **Jesus came into the world to bear our shame.** There's an Enemy that has harassed God's people long before the Philistines came around. Who has oppressed us for much longer than forty years. **He goes by the name of Satan, and he loves to use our own sin and disobedience to condemn us and cover us with shame.** And he has a strong case. We have sinned. All of us. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. To our shame.
 - ▶ But starting at his conception and birth, through his life and death and his resurrection, Jesus bears our sins on the cross and pays the debt. He bears our shame and makes us clean. He makes us new. That's the gospel!
- ❖ **All of us are ashamed of something. We can't look God in the eyes.** In fact, we know if we tried we'd probably fall on our faces like Manoah and scream, "We shall surely die!" Samson proves that even the most spiritually-advantaged among us has reasons to be ashamed before the Holy Judge of All.

- ❖ **What are you ashamed of? What makes you feel like you can't look God in the eyes?**
For some of you it's **the sin that you're presently entertaining** in your life. Repent of it. Turn from it and turn to Jesus and his abundant grace to forgive and to cover your shame.
 - ▶ For others of you, the shame has something to do – not with sin per se – but with something in your past or something you're dealing with in the present. Maybe for some of you, like Manoah's wife, **your shame is associated with childlessness**. Maybe you're married or maybe you're not. Whether it's due to infertility or just singleness, you feel a sense of barrenness and a sense of shame.

- ❖ Friend, the only way you can look God in the eyes is by looking first to Jesus. **Let him bear your shame. Let him give you a better name.** Exchange the name of sinner for saint, of orphan for child, of enemy for friend. Let him take from you the label of barren, so he can replace it with a fruitfulness and fullness in Christ, that satisfies your deepest longings for love and completeness.
 - ▶ We can go to the Father and look into his holy, merciful eyes if we go through Jesus his Son. That's ultimately what this Old Testament birth narrative is pointing us to. **To a great advent of a greater child who carries a greater promise to deliver us from our great sin and shame.** O come let us adore him!