

*Series: God in the Midst of the Chaos*

*“Sampson: Riddle of Grace”*

Introduction: When we left Judges last week, I think it fair to say that chaos reigned. Jephthah, the judge in question, had sacrificed his only daughter, had left his family without an heir, and had left the nation he was leading mired in a civil war. The comment we’ve grown used to seeing after the reign of a judge, or deliverer—“Then the land had peace for X number of years”—is noticeably absent. And, when God’s people fall back into their old ways of doing evil—forgetting about him and flirting with the idols of the land—and God sends a people group called the Philistines to oppress them and wake them up, we no longer hear a cry for deliverance. In its place is what seems like a hopeless resignation and despair.

Judges 13-16 zooms in on one particular family, a man named Manoah and his wife. The particular piece of information we are given about them is that had been unable to conceive a child. In that sense, they were a microcosm of Israel as a whole. They were helpless, and they were hopeless and they seemed to be without a future. But, remarkably, God, as we have seen, keeps showing up, reaching out to and rescuing his people, and keeping his purposes for his creation moving forward. In a story filled with riddles, one commentator calls this one the “riddle of grace.” Let’s hear how it begins. [READ 13]

I. The God of the Impossible

A. If this opening chapter of the Samson cycle rings any bells, it is probably because it is one of several examples of how God seemed to love to work in the world through a child whose existence, humanly speaking, was impossible. Isaac, the promised son to Abraham, through whose line blessing to the world was to come, along with Isaac’s son Jacob, and his son, Joseph, were all born to women who had been barren – Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel (Ge. 18:9-15; 21:1-7; 25:21-26; 29:31; 30:22-24). Samuel, whom God would use to anoint the first two chosen kings for his people, was born to a woman, Hannah, who had been unable to bear children (1 Sam. 1:1-28). John the Baptist, who was called to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord—the King of kings—was born to a barren woman, Elizabeth (Lk. 1:7). And just to toss in Jesus – his mother Mary was not barren, but the God of the impossible determined to up the ante and enable that birth to happen without the aid of a human father!

B. Each birth was something the mother humanly incapable of. Through each birth, God was showing that the outworking of his promises to bless and rescue the world was something no human could manage. Each birth came into a hopeless situation. Each birth came through the God who, as Paul puts it to the Romans when reflecting on the experience of Abraham and Sarah, “gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not” (Ro. 4:17). Each birth reflects the surprising, amazing grace of God, who loves to bring his light into our darkness, his order into our chaos, even when and especially when we have done nothing to deserve it and lots not to deserve it! It is where our hope in God is grounded.

C. And so it was in the dark, chaotic days of the Judges for a man named Manoah and his wife. Just as Israel had become helpless and hopeless, so had they: “unable to give birth.” This was much harder than we might imagine for in the ancient world, children were considered a mark of God’s blessing, while barrenness was considered to be a mark of divine displeasure. Further, one’s economic well-being in the present, and means of care in old age, depended on having children. Without a child,

one's future was bleak at best. But then one day the Lord made himself known to this couple, appearing first to Manoah's wife and declaring that she would give birth to a son. After telling her husband he was going to become a father, he prayed for wisdom: "Let the man of God you sent to us come again to teach us how to bring up the boy who is to be born." I so get that prayer!

Illustration: I remember when Rama was pregnant one of the popular books making the rounds was titled, *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. It contained all of the various things that would and could happen to a woman during her nine months of pregnancy. But then came the day when, after giving birth, the nurse wheeled you down the hallway and into your car and off you drove with a few balloons and a cheery farewell, having no clue as to what do next, for the book had come to an end! I remember thinking, where's the *Now What Do We Do* book? That's the one I really needed!!

Certainly, our children will make their own choices (and Samson made a whole lot of bad ones) but what a wonderful prayer for a father to pray. How can we lead them and guide them into the wisdom of God that can bring them good understanding for life? Well, the man of God did return and when Manoah asked him how he was to raise the boy the angel somewhat humorously, I think, puts Manoah in his place by saying, "Listen to what your wife has already told you!" What had she been told, and what did the angel graciously repeat for Manoah?

## II. A Nazarite Vow

A. Essentially, Manoah's wife had been told that this child to be born was going to be no ordinary child. He would be the one who would begin to deliver the Israelites from the oppression of the Philistines. To do so, he would be dedicated to God from the womb through a Nazarite vow. Such a vow is described in Numbers 6:1-21. The purpose of such a vow was to ask for help from God during a crucial time. It was a sign that one was looking to God with great intensity and focus, seeking to live in his presence every day. It had three components: You were not to cut your hair during the period of the vow; you were not to drink anything that came from a vine; you were not to have any kind of contact with a dead body, keeping yourself clean like a priest would do.

B. What's noteworthy about this particular vow is that the parents were taking the vow for their son, and it was a vow that was to start immediately—in the womb, as the stipulations would be kept by his mother--and last his whole life (v. 7). Given that Israel's problem, the "evil" that they kept slipping back into, was forgetting God and pursuing idolatry, the people seemed to especially need a leader who would be "separated," or "set apart" for service to God, and able to lead others in this direction too. That it was a lifelong vow probably indicates that the crisis had become of such a magnitude that a lifelong Nazarite is needed, and may even hint that it would only be through his death that any kind of rescue would take place.

## III. To Whom or What Does Samson Point?

A. Now that last fact, as well as a few others, like Samson's miraculous birth, his being betrayed to the Philistines by a friend, his being tortured and put on public display, his death coming with arms outstretched, his being a solo savior (no army helped him), has led not a few scholars over the centuries to see Samson as a type of Christ, as one who points us to Jesus. Well, while his death may have certain similarities to the death of Jesus, his life certainly did not. For Samson, as we'll consider next week, spent most of his life running away from his Nazirite status, doing almost everything he could to violate

his vows. Far from the life Jesus lived, Samson was violent, impulsive, testosterone-charged, emotionally immature, and self-centered!

B. And although we read that as he grew up, the Lord blessed him and the Spirit of the Lord began to stir in him, not all was right. He was certainly blessed with extraordinary strength – he tore lion apart with his bare hands; he caught and tied together 300 foxes; he killed 1000 Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey; he broke ropes that had been tightly bound around him; he removed a city gate and carried it up a hill; and he broke down the pillars of a great house – but he was never able to fully defeat the Philistines (v. 5). And, while Samson is given more space than any other judge, it is space that is largely occupied with describing Samson’s resisting of the Spirit and his dangerous dalliances with three different women and his desire for revenge.

C. So Samson is an intriguing character, even a bit of a riddle himself. Yes, he was a flesh and blood indicator that God had not given up on his people, and that they were a people in need of his grace. But Samson was also filled with flaws and it quickly becomes clear that something, someone, greater than Samson was needed to rescue God’s people and continue his purposes. Ultimately, Samson highlights the fact that what the world needs is the newness of life that can come only through Jesus. He heals our old life through the forgiveness of sin and gives us the possibility of living a new one through the gift of his Spirit, loving God with all of our being, and our neighbor as ourselves. That is the good news that has been entrusted to us and the agenda we are called to pursue.

So, this Samson cycle should raise some questions for us. As you read chapters 14-16 this week, ask yourself

- What do we value?
- What ways of the world lure us?
- Where do we find it difficult to be faithful?
- How can we stand firm?
- How can we use our gifts to serve others?
- How can we make space for the Spirit to bring us into the fullness of all God has created us to be?