

Judges | When All Hell Breaks Loose

Out of Death, Sweetness

Judges 14.5-9

11.3.19

Then Samson went down to Timnah with his father and mother, and came as far as the vineyards of Timnah; and behold, a young lion came roaring toward him. ⁶ The Spirit of the LORD came upon him mightily, so that he tore him as one tears a young goat though he had nothing in his hand; but he did not tell his father or mother what he had done. ⁷ So he went down and talked to the woman; and she looked good to Samson. ⁸ When he returned later to take her, he turned aside to look at the carcass of the lion; and behold, a swarm of bees and honey were in the body of the lion. ⁹ So he scraped the honey into his hands and went on, eating as he went. When he came to his father and mother, he gave some to them and they ate it; but he did not tell them that he had scraped the honey out of the body of the lion.

We've been working through the Book of Judges – it's the history between Joshua taking the Israelites into the Promised Land (after Moses and the Exodus) and the time of the Samuel and the kings.

If you've been with us for a good bit of the series (today is #8) – I'm wondering how you're feeling?

You might find this period of history depressing. Churches that use what's called the Common Lectionary, which is an internationally established schedule of Bible readings for Sunday sermons (most Lutheran, Episcopal, Methodist, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches use the Lectionary) and the Lectionary basically skips the whole book of Judges.

I can see why! It's very dark (and I warn you: it's going to get darker!) and it all raises the question of "HOW ARE WE SUPPOSED TO READ THE BIBLE?"

I think this is the right moment to review a little bit and use today's text about the last major Judge and maybe the best known, Samson, to make Samson a kind of case-study on how to read AND HOW TO BENEFIT from very strange passages in the Bible.

We've tried to model it in this sermon series but today I want to gather up some of the loose ends to show how even the darkest portions of the Bible (like the life of Samson) can be read for our spiritual good.

And to get there I simply went to ask:

1. Where Have We Been?
2. We Are We Now?
3. Where Are We Going?

Where have we been? Well, the book started with the death of Joshua who was a great example and a wonderful leader who got the people INTO their inheritance and divided the land among the tribes and warned them NOT to mingle with the religion of death – that form of idolatry that tried to coerce the gods by sacrificing children on pagan altars.

The people (as we've seen) make a good start in ridding the land of death-religion... but they seem to forget God and His covenant. They forget they're married to YHWH (the God of Abraham) and they turn to statues/idols that they THINK they can control. Then God wakes them up by pain – by other peoples who come against them and it hurts.

Then they cry out and Israel turns back to her Divine Husband... and He (YHWH) raises up a rescuer/judge empowered by God's presence/Spirit to save and govern the people. Then there's peace: the CYCLE.

That's where we've been and I asked: is that how we should learn from this book? Are WE also destined to the cycle: remember God, then forget, then have pain and consequences, then cry out, get rescued, have peace and start the cycle AGAIN? Is that what God has for US? And I answered NO but said I'd revisit the CYCLE later...and that later is TODAY! (Just a minute!)

And see what's happened in this dark history is the cycle has begun to break down. They forget God faster. They turn away from God more completely ("seven gods" – last week; [10.6]). The times of pain grow longer before they cry out. The WAY they cry out is NOT really a return to trust in God – it's only to make the pain stop (10.16-17). God sees through it.

The leaders are not people of integrity/character. The first judge (after Joshua) was Othniel and he was a real believer. He had a wonderful godly wife (Achsah – daughter of Caleb) and Othniel fought for her and they believed God together. It was a picture of male/female cooperation as God intended.

We saw something similar in the next judges – Barak and Deborah: they cooperated and fought together and then sang that song together.

But then after many generations the cycle is breaking down... society is disintegrating. The people are abused by their oppressors for decades (13.1) until they don't even cry out anymore – they're just used to it (15.11).

The judges are NOT people of integrity. Each new judge after Gideon is worse than the one before. Until we get to this last and most famous judge who is a moral/spiritual basket-case. Samson is a walking contradiction – strongest man and weakest man.

So where are WE now and how does this “strongweakman” and his story help us read the book and the Bible and benefit from it?

Well, Samson was born as a miracle. His mother was infertile and she was visited by God – a theophany, a physical appearance of God. And she was healed and the messenger of God’s presence promised her a son who must be raised as a Nazirite. He was to be specially dedicated to God with three lifelong prohibitions: 1) no alcohol or wine or even grapes 2) no contact with death (dead bodies) 3) no razor would ever touch his hair.

“And he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines...”

But when he grows up...it turns out...he’s a caveman. He is physically, miraculously strong but he is morally and spiritually weak. He is ruled by his appetites.

He can’t control himself at all. He sees a woman of the Philistines (pagans who were oppressing Israel) and he wants her. He tells his parents, “get her for me as a wife.”

His father says, “Son, you’re a Nazirite (dedicated to God!) and you’re an Israelite – you have to marry within the Covenant People! Samson says profoundly, “Get her for me. She looks good to me.”

Then Samson goes down to the Philistines with Mom and Dad... it seems like he took a little detour (away from them) so he could walk through a vineyard – WHY is he walking through a vineyard when he’s supposed to avoid grapes?!

Then this lion charges him and by God’s Spirit he kills the lion with his bare hands but doesn’t tell his parents. Then he reconnects with Mom and Dad, hangs out with the enemy Philistines and gets engaged (“she looked good to Samson” –ugh!) and later he wonders about that vineyard (he’s supposed to avoid) AND that dead lion (he’s supposed to avoid) and goes back to find a beehive IN THE CARCASS and he puts his caveman hands all up in there and scrapes out a bunch of honey that he shares with his parents... So he is NOW defiled and so are they.

Now the story goes on...with this dimwitted caveman telling these brilliant riddles (paradox) and this super strong guy is weak as a kitten in the hands of this young Philistine girl (paradox) and the question IS what are we supposed to DO WITH THIS?

See, we want news we can use! I mean we want to improve our lives...or we want to do God’s will...or to be able to apply what we’re reading to life in the modern world.

And we LOOK to the characters of the Bible to show us examples so we can follow... BUT what happens when we get to these judges (from Gideon onward) who are NOT GOOD PEOPLE?

And what about this most famous judge, Samson? Do we want our boys to grow up to be like Samson? If he's NOT an example to follow, what does Samson tell us about how we should read the Bible?

That brings us to the final point where are we going? THREE ways to move forward:

Samson is microcosm for Israel. He is like a perfect symbol for everything that was wrong in faithless Israel. He played around with the Covenant. He took the good gifts of God (his strength) and misused them on his own appetites INSTEAD OF GLORIFYING GOD and enjoying Him forever. He mingles with and consorts with the Gentiles – Samson is Israel in miniature. He is me in miniature and YOU. He's a warning to us – an example NOT to follow!

Second, Samson is a contrast to the True Successor of Joshua. Laura Smit a Hebrew scholar from Calvin College wrote, "The first statement in the book of Judges is that Joshua has died, and the entire book may be seen as a fruitless search for his successor."

Samson, like all the judges, is flawed; he's NOT the True Successor of Joshua. We're looking for the True Joshua and Samson makes it clear that it's NOT him! There will come another... Yeshua, Jesus Christ, who will plunge into death...He will take the bee-sting of death for us and OUT OF DEATH HE WILL BRING SWEETNESS – He will use death to kill death.

Samson reminds us of the True Successor who will also embody Israel. Samson embodied Israel's failures and Jesus Christ will be all that Israel was meant to be. We see Jesus Christ in and around Samson. An angel comes and announces His birth to His mother. Not a Nazirite but a Nazarene.

The only Man who could touch defiled things and NOT become Himself defiled because He, Jesus Christ, the True Successor we're looking for – He is contagious holiness. He touches the dead and defiled and they are NO LONGER DEAD AND DEFILED!

The Book of Judges starts on a hopeful note but as it unfolds, we realize – we need more than a merely mortal man or woman to rescue and rule us – we NEED GOD to take on flesh and defeat our great enemy, to take the sting and bring sweetness out death. Which has "now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Timothy 1.10).

Samson was ruled by passions but God used even his lusts and failings for good (14.4) and so God used OUR HATRED in killing Jesus Christ to turn death into a doorway from decay into New Creation!

Lastly, so what about the cycle? Are WE doomed to forget about God...then suffer pain, then wake up, cry out to God, be restored, be at peace for a little while and then do it again and again (like Sisyphus)?

Well, the Book of Judges can be used for our good when we recognize that NEED and the discovery of our own neediness is the occasion of faith. The “overwhelmingness” of life is a gift from God.

I hate to be in need. I hate to be dependent on people. I crave self-sufficiency and independence but as long as I’m under the illusion that “I GOT THIS” I am NOT living by faith.

C.S. Lewis wrote: “The good man is sorry for the sins, which have increased his Need. He is not entirely sorry for the fresh Need they have produced. And he is not sorry at all for the innocent Need that is inherent in his creaturely condition.” (*The Four Loves*)

So, are we stuck in the cycle? Well, NOT the degenerated cycle at the end of this dark book but a beautiful cycle where God’s Spirit within us groans over our own sin and over the brokenness of this old creation and He sends us again and again to Jesus Christ the answer to our need.

He is the One who will show us at last that our GREAT DREAD (Heb 2.15) – the Tomb has been transformed into a portal from this world of decay into the sweetness of “Life! Life! Eternal Life!” (*Pilgrim’s Progress*)