

It is... once again... the Advent season. ...”Silent Night” and “Hark the Herold Angels Sing”... “O Come All Ye Faithful... are enjoying their annual resurrection. ... We are celebrating the birth... of One... far greater than Samson. ... But this truth... however... should not cause us to take the announcement and nativity of Samson lightly. ... He... too... was a savior. At the announcement and nativity of Sampson... a savior for Israel was born. ... This message of glad tidings is the focus of Judges chapter 13. (Our passage this morning.) ... As soon as Manoah's wife is told she will bear a son... like Mary... she grasps the significance of his mission - that he will begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines'. ... Our passage this morning is like a guiding star... that must go before us... as we work our way through these four chapters of the Sampson narrative.

We are now about to examine the life of one of the most colorful... yet... careless men of the book of Judges. ... He is the Incredible Hulk... the Hercules... the Superman... of the Old Testament. ... But Samson is also one of the great puzzles of the Bible. ... He was a man of great victories... and great failures. ... Samson physically was the strongest man who ever lived but he also was very weak. ... It was his weakness that overcame his strength. ... The same truth applies to us too! (If left unchecked... our weakness will overtake any strengths we might have.)

Sampson pursued his fleshly desires with an all-out-abandonment... until God eventually abandoned him... leaving him to his own will... own way... and his own wickedness. ... He was determined to sin... and he reaped the consequences. ... Samson realized little of the potential that God had for him and he tragically failed. ... His life was a tragic tale of failure. And... in his failure... we find instruction and warning.

Hebrews 11 indicates that Sampson was a man of faith... but unfortunately he was not consistent in his faith and devotion to the Lord. ... Samson was undisciplined... unpredictable... and undependable because he was a double-minded man. ... One of our lessons from this section of Judges is: “The greatest ability you and I can ever have... is dependability.” ... The Bible reveals you could depend on Samson to be undependable. ... Are you dependable? ... Can the Lord count upon you with the things He has already revealed... or are you wishy washy and double minded? ... If so... you will fail like Samson.

Samson yielded his body to the carnal... fleshly appetites of the world. ... He craved the bright lights of the worldly Philistines... took part in their drunken parties... lusted after their women... partook of their pleasures..., and engaged in their carnal festivities. ... At every major turn of his life... he disobeyed the commandments of the Lord.

But Sampson serves as a mirror in which Israel could see itself ... and its history. Both kept yielding to their carnal lusts... and became unfaithful to their calling. There just wasn't any depth of degradation too low... that Sampson or Israel would not descend and eagerly dive into it! ... The history of Israel was the history of Samson. But God... in His sovereign mercy incorporated both... in His plan to redeem the world... and to save us for an eternity with Him.

From the very start of the Sampson narrative... Judges 13:1... this sovereign grace of God shines brightly.

Judges 13:1

We come to the same tedious refrain: *'And the sons of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord...'* This is the seventh cycle of sin in Judges. They are like a needle stuck on a record. ... Again we see that God's people have not learned their lesson about the consequences of sin. **One thing we learn from history is we do not learn from history.**

Please notice the phrase... *"In the sight of God."* ... In God's sight... the conduct of Israel was evil. ... (LISTEN!) God is the ONLY One Who defines whether something is evil or not. ... Legislature... modern-day progressive judges... and (I guess now the President of the United States) can pass laws... that permit... protect... and tell us that we should approve of behaviors that were once thought to be evil... But their new laws and politically correct policies... do not change the fact of its evil. ... What makes something evil... is that it is evil in God's sight! ... PERIOD! ... It simply cannot be dressed up to look acceptable... no matter what earthly authority is doing the dressing.

So evil (as defined by God) was being committed. But even so... God poured out His sovereign grace. ... The next sentence introduces us to Manoah and his childless wife...

Judges 13:2

Here we have in these first two verses... a sequence of three elements: (1) Israel's horrible turning away from God AGAIN... (2) Yahweh's judgment (the longest period of time in all of Judges... where God allowed Israel to be oppressed – 40 years!) ...and then from out of nowhere... BAM! (3) the beginnings of another account of Yahweh delivering His rebellious people.

... But... there is something notably missing... something we have come to expect. ... There is no statement... not even a hint... between verse 1 and verse 2 about Israel 'crying out' to Yahweh in their distress.

Of course with all of the other occasions... Israel's 'crying out' to Yahweh did not in itself involve true repentance. ... It was a cry for help in trouble rather than a confession of sin. ... Yet here in Judges 13... their cry is completely missing. ... Israel – in the power of Baal and oppressed by the Philistines - not only doesn't cry out in repentance from sin... but neither do they cry out for relief from misery. They have, apparently, grown accustomed to persecution... tyranny... servitude... and domination. ... They seem content with it.

It's frightening how quickly we can get accustomed to bondage and learn to accept the *status quo*. ... Many of our friends and neighbors... who don't know Christ... have become so accustomed to a hopeless bondage... and they have no idea what "Joy to the World" that we sing at this time of year is all about. ... Some of us... before we gave our lives to Christ... did not fully realize the extent of our bondage... that we were totally incapable gaining God attention or favor. But God in His sovereign mercy broke through... because He knew. It had to be an act of God. ... He acted on our behalf before we understood how great our need was. ... And in the same sovereign mercy... God brought forth a savior to rescue Israel from an awful bondage that they had come to accept.

Once you see this Israel... you marvel at this Israel's God. ... What does He do... when He has a people who refuse to forsake Baal... and have no desire to forsake Philistia? ... A people grown so used to bondage... they

don't even have sense to call out for relief? ... At least here the very God Who judges them... begins to work their deliverance – anyway! ... That is sovereign grace – grace greater than all our sin... than all our ignorance... than all our folly and pretense!

(BUT NOW STOP TO CONSIDER THIS...) ... God gave them what they needed without their asking for it. ... If Yahweh's help were given only when we prayed for it... only when we asked for it... only when we had sense enough to seek it... our very lives would have been washed up long ago! ... Now... God loves it when we pray. He is honored when we struggle through prayer to participate with Him in what He is doing in and around us. ... But we should never lose any sleep... staying awake wondering if there was anything we forgot to pray about... as if God's involvement is conditioned on whether or not we prayed. (“...*Oh no! Aunt Freida's surgery might not go well... because I forgot to pray...*”)

The next thing that we should consider is the place Yahweh begins...

Judges 13:2-5

We are introduced to Manoah the Danite in verse 2... and to the big fact about his wife – “*she was barren; she had not had a child.*” ... Even the Angel of the Lord seems to rub it in with His first words to her: “*Behold, you are barren; you have not borne children.*” ... Obviously the announcement was no great revelation to her. ... She did not need to be told that she was childless. ... The inability of a wife to bear children often made her vulnerable to her husband's whims. ... Most marriage contracts allowed for her husband to divorce her on such grounds. ... If he didn't divorce his

barren wife... It often led to the husband taking other wives... who... upon producing children... would assume a more favored status within the family.

But the announcement brought wonderful words of life. ... Words that meant no more shattered hopes... and the Angel of the Lord spoke them as certain facts. ... It was all part of a sovereign plan of mercy.

This theme of an angel coming to a barren woman... and announcing God's sovereign plan of mercy... is a familiar pattern in Scripture. ...Sarah (Abraham's wife) was anguishing over her childlessness... Rebekah's had spent her first twenty years of marriage childless... Rachel was both barren and green with envy until she at last bore Joseph and then Benjamin. Then later... after Samson... we meet Hannah in 1 Samuel. ... And then of course... we come to the New Testament where we have Elizabeth (the mother of John the Baptist)... in Luke 1... and Mary (the mother of Jesus)... also in Luke 1.

Each of those other moms-to-be have names... that Scripture gives to us. But here in Judges 13... the woman is both barren and anonymous. We don't even know her name. She is Manoah's wife and becomes Samson's mother... but her name is never given us. To her being childless... the Bible has added obscurity... She is the only one that this happens to... and is completely anonymous.

(BUT DO YOU KNOW WHAT...?) Yahweh often begins precisely there – in human obscurity and hopelessness... where there is no human energy or ability to serve. ... this is often His starting place. ... Samson's birth is another instance of "God's way of introducing an exceptional event through

impossible-looking circumstances...Yahweh will bring salvation out of nothingness... using an obscure character.

God brings His salvation or relieves the distress of His people... in the face of impossible human odds. ... He displays His power precisely when and where we can contribute nothing... and all in order to lift our eyes to the Lord Himself... so that we will have no illusions or delusions about where our help is found. ... That's why in the days when the Philistines ruled... the Angel of the Lord paid a special visit to a nameless... childless... woman.

My family and I have personally experienced God working in this manner on several occasions. ... This is not an untested truth. God broke through a hopeless situation in miraculous fashion... in bringing me here to pastor this church... for example. ... In 2003 a ministry position that I had held for 12 years came to a sudden and unexpected end. ... It had always been a ministry filled with challenge... but my head somehow stayed above water for 12 years... in a church that had a 30 year old reputation in our association for being its most troubled church. The two pastors BEFORE me ended up leaving the ministry. (Although one of them... I have learned has just returned.)

Myself... suddenly being out of ministry... we had no household income... with two teenage girls... my wife... and her mother... who was living with us. Our savings were eventually depleted... The house we owned had been on the market... but no one was making an offer on it... and nothing seemed to be on the horizon for our family. ... We faced impossible-looking circumstances.

One day my family and I traveled to San Jose at the invitation of some friends to have lunch with them. Ed and Helen asked about the search... and I remember telling them that something had to happen that week... or we would lose our house... and maybe our car... .. Also... at some other point in the conversation with our San Jose friends... Ed and Helen told us about property that they had just bought... just outside of a place called Bend Oregon. They asked, "Have you ever seen Bend and the surrounding area?" "No," we replied. ... "Well, if you EVER get the chance you must take it..."

God used that. The very next morning the phone rang. It was the chairman of the pastor search committee for this church. I told him at first that I was not interested. (I had some wrong suspicions.) But those suspicions crumpled by something that man said. ... It was almost the same thing... I had just heard in the back yard of our friends house in San Jose. ... He said, "*Have you ever seen Bend? We are very close to Bend. Why don't you just drive up, meet us, and see the area...*" ... I thought... "*OK... God! This seems like You getting my attention... so that I would allow You provide hope to our hopeless situation!*"

Are you... right now... in a situation that looks hopeless...? I am not saying that God WILL always break through miraculously for you. But He has done it enough times in Scripture... and enough times in my life... that I am learning to never count Him out. He seems to enjoy coming through in a way that is obviously His doing...

When He did this for Manoah's wife... He delivered a message that contained several details. She would give birth to a son... he was to

become a Nazarite... and he would BEGIN to deliver Israel from the Philistines.

Any man or woman could take a vow to become a **Nazirite**... to separate himself or herself to God. ... this is all explained in Numbers 6. The vow was to be voluntary... for an established... but limited amount of time... and involved three prohibitions: (1) no wine... strong drink... or anything associated with the grape vine... (2) no cutting of the hair... and (3) no contact with the dead. ... BUT... There are three things that are unusual concerning Samson... and his Nazirite vow. ... First, he did not take it voluntarily. His parents made it for him and told him that he had to continue it. Second, it was not for a limited time. ... It was a lifetime vow. Third, in the chapters that follow... we are about to see that Sampson will break every one of the Nazirite vow's stipulations. ... His hair will be cut... he will eat honey - right out of the dead carcass of a lion... And he will drink at his wedding feast.

The angel of the Lord also declared that Sampson would only BEGIN to deliver Israel from the Philistines. Success knocked at his door. He was a beginner... not a finisher. ... He began to deliver Israel, but he never finished the task.

This announcement about her future baby is condemnatory of Samson. He... unlike other judges... would not (and in fact did not) bring a complete deliverance from the oppressor to Israel. ... He only *"began to deliver Israel."* He did not break the yoke of the Philistines. ... He only shook it. Samson's disobedience kept him from bringing a complete deliverance.

(LISTEN) There are many Christians like that. ... They make a great beginning... but they do not finish a task. ... Paul said to the Galatians...

Galatians 5:7 (ESV)

You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?

The Galatians started out with a bang... and ended up with a fizzle. ...Many Christians begin to do what God has revealed to them... that He wants them to do. They might start reading the Bible every day. They get through January and part of the way through the month of February... and then let it fall by the wayside. ... Others start a ministry in the church with great enthusiasm. They just begin and don't go on with it. ... Now here is a very sad statistic that I think I have witnessed. The average for a new ministry in the church to sustain vital interest... before people start dropping away... is only 8 weeks! (Whenever we start a new ministry in our church... I always want to wait and see how it is going after 8 weeks before I am willing to say it is successful...)

Believers today share this unfortunate characteristic with Sampson. Unlike most of the previous judges... Samson didn't deliver his people from foreign domination... but he BEGAN the work of deliverance that others would finish. ... As a powerful and unpredictable hero... Samson frightened and troubled the Philistines... and kept them from devastating Israel. ... It would take the prayers of Samuel... and the conquests of David... about 20 years later... to finish the job that Samson started... and give Israel complete victory over the Philistines.

Sampson's incompleteness... was part of the specific information... that Manoah's wife was given... but Manoah wanted to know more!

Judges 13:6-14

The dialogue between Manoah and the heavenly visitor borders on the comical... Manoah tries to extract from the angel all the information he can... but the angel of the Lord refuses to satisfy him with long answers. His responses to Manoah's questions are polite... but curt. ...Unwilling to let himself be manipulated by this man... the messenger of God only repeats the instruction that has already been given.

Manoah still wanted more information... so he tries one more maneuver.

Hospitality custom of the day required that any stranger who approached a dwelling... was to be offered a meal and refreshment. ... This was especially true if the stranger was obviously a man of God. Now... Manoah offers his guest something unusual. ... Strangers were not very often offered fresh meat. ... Usually it would be some grain and a place to rest. ... But Manoah offers a meal that would take some time to prepare... and then would require the stranger to linger as they sat and ate. ... I think Manoah was purposely trying to delay the messenger so he could get more information out of him. The angel's response to Manoah's request seems to affirm this.

Judges 13:15-18

Now we have come... to what I think is the main thrust of this entire chapter. ... These verses bring out what I think is the main principle of Judges 13.

Manoah knows that his visitor has knowledge of the future. At this point he only sees him as a prophet... not THE Angel of the Lord... in other words Jesus Christ (before He came to earth as Emanuel.) ... Manoah doesn't recognize Who he is speaking with... but he does believe that the future He has announced is true. ... Manoah wants to know more about the future... and what he needs to do. But what does the pre-incarnate Christ tell him? The Angel of the Lord keeps telling him to do what he has already been instructed to do. ... Manoah wants to be better prepared for his future and he thinks that knowing more about what lays ahead... is the way to be prepared. ... But God's answer is – just do what you already know to do!

May I ask... how much pre-occupation do you have... trying to figure out what is likely up ahead in your future...? Are we perhaps being offered some insight from our passage here... of a better pre-occupation...?

I will confess... I probably worry too much... whether or not I have amply prepared for the future. ... If I am not careful those investment firms that advertise retirement accounts on TV would have me MORE worried about the future... than what I am supposed to be doing in the present (obeying the things that God has instructed me to be doing.) (LISTEN) I am NOT saying don't prepare for the future. ... But let me explain what I am saying... by asking you a question... "What is the proportional amount of time and energy that you spend worrying about the future... compared to the amount of time and energy you spend worrying that you might not be doing all the things God has already revealed... that He wants you to be doing right now...? ... Are they even close...? Is your concentration on being obedient to instruction you already know... nearly half of all the "what-if scenarios" and maybe's that play in your mind about the future...?"

God's Word seems to be saying to us in Judges 13... "No, don't neglect to prepare for the future. But your best preparation... is to have a greater focus on doing the things you already know that you should be doing...!"

...Are you studying God's Word regularly...? Are you implementing it's truth to your life...? Are you casting seeds of the Gospel before friends and neighbors...? ...Using your spiritual gift to help the Body of Christ grow...? ...Doing what Christ has asked you to help fulfill "the Great Commission"...?

Judges 13:17-18

Manoah is still preoccupied with the future. He is thinking that once the prophecy has come true... he could look this prophet up... track him down... focus a spotlight on this man's miraculous works... and call a great deal of attention to this spectacular occurrence. "*Let's revel by looking back to what just happened here! So tell me your name so we can do this...*"

But the Angel of the Lord is far less enthusiastic about Manoah's future plans. "...*The knowledge you ask for... is beyond your comprehension... it is too great...*" ... Sometimes our desire to know certain spiritual truth is not granted us. Sometimes God says... "*This is not to be your focus. You are to concentrate on the things I have already given you...*"

He does give His name though. It is one of the Titles of the Messiah that Isaiah will later use in Isaiah 9:6. "His Name will be Wonderful... Counselor... Might God!" ... Oh yes... he didn't know it... but he had been talking to Jesus Himself. Here is how he found out.

Judges 13:19-23

We should not miss the fear that Yahweh arouses in this couple. ... Manoah brings his sacrifice with its grain offering... offers it to Yahweh... and then the Angel of the Lord... does something wonderful. The flame went up from the altar and the Angel of Yahweh ascended in the flame of the altar. ... The writer twice insists that 'Manoah and his wife were watching' ... It was a real... The messenger could not have simply walked away like a magic trick.

They fell to the ground... then the light dawned. ... Fear rose ... Manoah thought back to when the Lord informed Moses why he could only have an indirect view of his glory:

Exodus 33:20 (ESV)

But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live."

Being too near God was not cozy... it was fatal. ... Manoah apparently felt they had seen too much... he and his wife had been too close.

OK... it is time to wipe those patronizing smiles off our faces. Christians sometimes have a tendency to read passages like this with their condescending, silent commentary: *'Well, of course, Manoah was only an Old Testament believer and didn't understand.'* ... On the contrary... Manoah understood perfectly – and he trembled. ... We must allow Manoah to be our teacher. ... We had better not pooh-pooh his reaction... as understandably naïve. ... Where did we ever get the idea... that the presence of God is not dangerous? ... Have we perhaps assumed something as untrue... as God somehow became safe... because we live in

A.D.? ... The Apostle Paul said in fear and trembling we are to work out all the things that God has worked into our salvation... (Philippians 2:12). But we would much rather tremble about our future!

We need...however... the rest of the picture. ... Side by side with the fear expressed by Manoah... stands the comfort declared by his wife in her 'faith-full' reasoning: *'If Yahweh had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering from us, he would not have let us see all and, at the same time, have told us such things'* .

Manoah had the reverence... but not the comfort. He had the fear... but not the joy. ... We need a properly balanced response to the presence of God.

Whenever I begin a new term at the community college where I teach... I try to instill a similar kind of balance in my students. There has to be a certain amount of fear... along with a certain amount of comfort... joy and levity. If either one is over-emphasized it will result in a very bad school term. If I am too stern... it results in “why-even-try attitudes” and a high drop-out rate ... But if I open the floodgates of frivolity... a contempt of familiarity very quickly arises and student assume they can do whatever they want and still get a good grade. I have given my first day of class speech to my daughters... and they have told me... “Dad... you would make me pee in my pants if sat in on that!” ... But the next day we start doing some fun things... along with some warnings and serious foundational standards.

Why am I telling you this...? Because I see from our passage here... that there should be a proper balance... a faithful tension... in our worship of

God. ... We need what we see demonstrated by this couple (Sampson's parents). This should be true of our response to Yahweh's presence in our regular worship. ... Some can shudder but never smile before God. ... Some of us have reverence without assurance. ... Others can so focus on a similar kind of balance in God's nearness... that they risk turning warm intimacy into cheap familiarity. But the Bible keeps us in bounds:

Psalm 2:11 (ESV)

Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling.

Judges 13:24-25

There is nothing like chapter 13 in the rest of Judges. Samson's is the only nativity story.

Why would the writer single out Samson's nativity and make such a point of it? ... Because he wants to show that... at least in this case... Yahweh didn't merely raise up a deliverer who was merely available. ... He grew one – from scratch... before he was born. It is crucial that we see this, lest we think Yahweh's salvation is always an ad hoc, Band-Aid affair, a piece of divine crisis management instead of a plan that Yahweh has had in view far in advance.

(LISTEN) God has... and always has had a plan for your life. He has ministry for you... and it is not ad hoc. ... “*Oh there's Herman over there... I guess I might as well use him...*” ... You might be inclined to try to find out all you can about it. But our lesson today from Judges 13 is that your best preparation is to be preoccupied in doing what you already know.

What has God been asking you to do...?