

Just over a month ago we were celebrating the birth of a child far greater than Samson. We were singing at the close of the second verse of the Christmas carol, “Silent Night”, “Christ the Saviour is born, Christ the Saviour is born”. But that fact should not cause us to take Samson lightly. He, too, was a saviour - at his birth a saviour was born. The keynote of chapter 13 and indeed chapters 13-16 is found in verse 5 of chapter 13. As soon as Manoah’s wife is told she will bear a son, she hears his mission: “and he will begin the deliverance (the salvation) of Israel from the hands of the Philistines”. True, he will only begin to save, but even that constitutes him a saviour. The theme is still salvation. But there is one danger. Samson is such a larger-than-life character, a real larrikin, that we may become pre-occupied with him. We must not allow our focus on the saviour God raises up to eclipse the mighty and merciful God who saves.

1. The Grace God Maintains (verse 1)

Here in verse 1, in a sense, is the same tedious refrain: “Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, so the Lord delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years”. That is all. The next sentence introduces us to Manoah and his childless wife. We have Israel’s apostasy followed by God’s judgment and the beginnings of another story of God’s deliverance. However, there is something missing, something we have come to expect. There is no statement between verse 1 and verse 2 about Israel “crying out” to God in their distress. Here we have Israel - in the power of Baal and subject to the rule of the Philistines. It is an Israel who not only does not cry out in repentance from sin but also does not even cry out for relief from misery. They have, apparently, as the bondage to the Philistines continued for decades, grown accustomed to it. In fact, it would seem that in Samson’s time they had become content with it - surprised should anyone suggest otherwise (see 15:11).

Seeing this situation, surely we have to marvel at the God of Israel. What does he do when he has a people who refuse to forsake Baal and have no desire to forsake Philistia? A people who have grown so used to bondage that they don’t even have sense to call out for relief? Here the very God who judges them begins to work their deliverance anyway. That is grace - grace greater than all our sin, than all our stupidity. Surely we cannot fail to rejoice in such a gracious God! For if God’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, how poor and destitute we would be.

2. The God of the Impossible (vv.2-5)

In verses 2-3, we are introduced to Manoah, from the tribe of Dan, and his wife - who remains nameless, and yet is the real heroine of this chapter. And so, as “the angel of the Lord appeared to her”, God began to act to save his people. Samson is the only judge chosen before he is born, or even conceived. Although Manoah’s wife was “sterile and childless”, the angel told her that she was “going to conceive and have a son”. She must not drink alcohol, or eat anything unclean, or cut his hair, because this son “is to be a Nazirite, set apart to God from birth, and he will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines”.

The Nazirite vow to which the angel refers is found in Numbers 6:1-21. It contained 3 basic stipulations: a Nazirite was not to cut hair during the period of the vow; was not to drink any produce from vines, alcoholic or non-alcoholic; and was not to have contact with any dead body. The purpose of the Nazirite vow was to ask for God’s special help during a crucial time. It was a sign that you were looking to God with great intensity and focus. As is clear from Numbers 6, the Nazirite vow was made voluntarily and for a definite period of time. But Samson was being born into the Nazirite state involuntarily (his parents were taking the vows for him), and he was to stay a Nazirite all his life. His mother was not to drink wine or eat unclean foods, because the Nazirite vow started immediately - when Samson was in her womb! Samson was truly to be “set apart to God from (and before) birth” (v.5).

This special birth points us forward, of course, to the birth of Jesus. Indeed, God has often worked in the world through a child whose existence, humanly speaking, is impossible. Isaac, the son whom God had promised to Abram, and through whom would come blessing to the world (Genesis 12:1-3), was born to Sarah who was barren. Hannah, the mother of the judge and prophet, Samuel, had been unable to bear children. John the Baptist, who would announce the coming of the Lord himself, was born to Elizabeth, who was “barren....and well along in years” (Luke 1:7). Mary’s pregnancy was impossible for a different reason - she was a virgin. In the birth of Jesus, the degree of miraculousness goes off the scale - for all the other babies, God’s power opened women’s wombs so that they could conceive naturally, but with Mary, God enabled her to conceive without a human father at all. Each of these births was something the mother was humanly incapable of - God was showing that the outworking of his salvation promises was something no human could manage.

There are 2 important ways in which the birth of Samson, and those of Isaac, Samuel and John, are different from that of Jesus. First, the others births each happened in the shadow of disgrace. In ancient times, a woman’s fertility was a major part of her honour and dignity. And Israelite women, remembering God’s promise to Eve that a Saviour would be born who would defeat the devil and undo the effects of sin, would have longed to participate - potentially - in the fulfilment of that promise. In the case of these women - Sarah, Hannah, Elizabeth and Manoah’s wife - God visited them in mercy and lifted the shame and disgrace, bringing honour and joy. But the birth of Jesus brought disgrace to mother and son. We should never forget that our Saviour was born in scandal and suspicion. This reminds us that while the other “saviours” gained honour and glory in order to do their work, Jesus lost all his honour and glory to do his (he indeed humbled himself!)

Second, the salvation Samson would bring would be incomplete. He would only “begin the deliverance of Israel from the....Philistines” (v.5). Samson is the last judge in the book of Judges, but he points beyond himself to the one who would complete the victory over the Philistines: to King David, God’s king anointed by Samuel. And David’s salvation was also incomplete, because he provided rest from Israel’s enemies but could not bring victory over the sin of his own heart, far less his people’s. Only Jesus’ salvation is a complete salvation - in this sense, only Jesus finished the job. As the angel told Mary’s fiancé, Joseph: “you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). Samson points us to David, and beyond him to the greater David - Jesus.

3. Faith and Obedience (vv.6-22)

When Sarah heard that she would become pregnant despite her barrenness, she laughed with disbelief (Genesis 18:9-15). Samson’s mother, though, showed complete faith in the Lord’s ability to do the impossible. She believed the word from God, delivered through his messenger, the angel of the Lord, just as Mary would 1,200 years later, saying to the angel Gabriel, “May it be to me as you have said” (Luke 1:38). Further, Samson’s mother obeyed the word from God. She accepted the need to apply to herself the Nazirite behavioural code in order to have a son who was used in God’s service. Both Manoah’s wife and Mary trust that God will do what he has planned and promised and, at cost to themselves (adhering to the Nazirite vow for Samson’s mother, shame and disgrace for Mary), become obedient to that plan. This is faith.

Samson’s father also shows faith. He asks God to grant them a return visit from the angel to teach them “how to bring up the boy who is to be born” (v.8). This isn’t a lack of faith in God on Manoah’s part. He assumes that the promise will come true - that a boy will be born. His request is not for proof that they will have a son, but for help to know how to raise the son. The Lord graciously sends the angel back. But the angel will not give them any more specifics. Their son will be set apart, and Manoah’s wife must do all that the

angel has told her - specifically relating to the Nazirite vow. But the angel will give them no more rules. Manoah - not realizing that this is a heavenly angel rather than a human prophet - offers food to this messenger. The angel refuses it but tells Manoah to "prepare a burnt offering and offer it to the Lord".

Manoah had prayed for help - wanting to know "what is to be the rule for the boy's life and work" - and that help was apparently refused. But, in fact, Manoah did get the help he needed, but not in the form he was asking for. Instead, God gave Manoah a revelation of who he is. As we have seen when we looked at Gideon, the angel of the Lord is likely the Son of God, a pre-incarnation appearance of Christ. And his name, he says, "is beyond understanding" (v.18). It is too wonderful for a human to grasp. This points Manoah to the angel's glory. Then "the Lord" himself "did an amazing thing....as the flame blazed up from the altar toward heaven, the angel of the Lord ascended in the flame" (vv.19-20). This would be something Manoah and his wife would never forget. The angel of the Lord indelibly prints in their minds his greatness. At last Manoah "realized that it was the angel of the Lord". "We are doomed to die!" he said to his wife. "We have seen God!" He knows enough of his people's history to understand that no one can see God's face and live (Exodus 33:20). But while he panics, his wife remains calm. If the Lord had meant to kill them, he would not have accepted their sacrifices, nor shown them all these things. God had not come near to them to destroy them, sinful humans though they were. In this, he was showing them his goodness.

So, in reply to being asked about how to bring up their God-given son - how to live God's way and please him - the Lord says, in effect, to them: "You need to know me and my character far more than you need more information. All the rules in the world would not be able to give you direction in the innumerable decisions and choices you will have to make with your son. Only a deep understanding of who I am can give you the guidance you need". As we will see, Samson's own life story indicates that his parents fell quite short in their child-rearing, and failed to show and explain God's character to their son. Yet God's message to them is a message to all of us. We think we need rules, but we need to know God. God does not, and will not, give us a guidebook for every twist and turn, every doubt and decision in our lives. He gives us something much better - he gives us himself.

In general, a parent gives a child fewer instructions as he or she gets older. When your child is very little, you must virtually follow them around and say: "Don't touch this", "Don't do that", "Don't go there". A child doesn't know not to put his finger in a wall socket or not to eat dirt from the indoor plant. They need to obey your commands. The older a child gets, the more you expect them to incorporate their parents' values and thinking and wisdom into their own heart so that they don't need detailed instructions all the time. In order to guide children into maturity, parents must increasingly move from lots of external rules to internal motives and principles of wisdom. In the same way, Christians in the New Testament receive far fewer rules and regulations than believers in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, so much of what you could eat and do and wear was prescribed. And then, on the high priest's ephod, there were the Urim and Thummin, which gave "yes" and "no" answers to direct questions to God. What a huge amount of guidance and therefore certainty they could have of God's will. Many Christians consider this a more advanced level of guidance than we have today. Like Manoah, we would like to have considerably more regulations.

But that is to mistake external rules for a mature relationship. Paul says that the Christian is not to be "conformed", but rather "transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2). We don't get lots of prescriptions. We do, however, through the Holy Spirit, get God, and enjoy knowing "the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16). We can look at his rescue on the cross, and his resurrection in triumph, and see the character of God much more clearly than even the greatest heroes in the Old Testament could. We don't need to

know about God through his external standards when we can know God through his Spirit. We need to remember the lesson Manoah was taught!

4. A Distinct Pattern (vv.24-25)

In accordance with God's promise, Manoah's wife "gave birth to a boy and named him Samson" (v.24). The name means "little sun". Since the sun was considered a god by many Canaanites, this is another clue that Israel, while not rejecting the Lord outright, had combined half-hearted worship of him with worship of other nations' gods.

Verses 24b-25 contain all we know of Samson's childhood. There are only these 2 sentences - a very terse summary - relating in any way to his childhood. Obviously, the writer is not interested in giving us a full biography or he wouldn't have omitted all the details of Samson's childhood. Just as obviously he thinks that Samson's birth story is very important or he wouldn't have devoted so much attention to it. Interestingly, Jesus' story follows the same pattern. Both Matthew and Luke devote significant space to Jesus' genealogy and birth (and early infancy) but we have nothing about his childhood except the one incident in Luke 2:41-52. There is nothing like chapter 13 in the rest of Judges. Samson's is the only nativity story.

Why then this pattern? 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, God didn't merely raise up a deliverer, a saviour-judge, who was, as it were, already available (like Ehud or Gideon). Rather, he grew one right from the womb. It is crucial that we see this, so that we don't think that God's salvation is always an ad hoc, band-aid solution, a piece of crisis management, instead of a plan that God has had in mind far in advance. This is exactly what dumbfounds and gladdens us about the Greater-than-Samson, Jesus Christ, who ransomed us at such great sacrifice and cost - in whom we have so great a salvation. As the apostle Peter says in his first letter: "God chose him as your ransom long before the world began, but now in these last days he has been revealed for your sake" (1 Peter 1:20 - NLT). Surely it boggles the imagination, let alone the mind, to think that something from before the creation of the world could be for my sake, for your sake. Praise God for his indescribable gift.

Amen