

## JUDGES

After Joshua died at the ripe old age of 110 the Israelites didn't keep the promise he'd told them they couldn't keep – to serve the Lord:

“After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshipped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the LORD to anger because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths.” (Jud 2:10-13 NIV)

They hadn't obeyed God's command to completely cast out the original inhabitants. The Israelite tribes merged with their Canaanite neighbours and accepted the local forms of Baal-worship, and the Lord handed them over to their enemies:

“In his anger against Israel the LORD handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress.” (Jud 2:14-15 NIV)

But, God does not abandon his people, instead he gave them 'Judges' — leaders who were gifted with faith, strength and wisdom.

“Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders.” (Jud 2:16 NIV)

And the people repented of their sins and were protected from their enemies, but only during the lifetime of each judge:

“Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshipped them. Unlike their fathers, they quickly turned from the way in which their fathers had walked, the way of obedience to the LORD's commands. Whenever the LORD raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the LORD had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them.” (Jud 2:16-18 NIV)

The Book of Judges tells us about twelve of these figures. These judges rescued the Israelites from a series of desperate situations, so that they continued to experience God's power to save them. However, they repeatedly lapsed back into their old ways. Once a crisis was passed, they forgot God again. They returned to the attractions of paganism until another defeat brought them to their senses. This pattern was repeated throughout the era of the Judges. Generally each of the 12 judges mentioned in the book of judges was raised up against a particular enemy. Ehud fought for Israel against the Moabites. Deborah and Barak fought the Canaanites. Gideon delivered Israel from the Midianites. Jephthah rescued Israel from the oppression of Ammon. Samson was the Israelites' champion against the Philistines. It is clear that main purpose of the narrative of the Book of Judges is theological rather than historic – it seeks to set out the pattern of the rebellion of God's people, God's judgement upon them and his eventual grace.

Today I'm just going to look at two of these judges in a bit more detail, Gideon and Sampson.

### Gideon

As I just said he was tasked with ridding Israel of the Midianites. They were a tribe which occupied the district in the northern Ḥigāz, east of the Gulf of ‘Aqabah. They provided Moses with a safe haven, but are now enemies of the Israelites. Gideon was called directly by God as a mighty warrior:

“When the angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior." "But sir," Gideon replied, "if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, ‘Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?’ But now the LORD has abandoned us and put us into the hand of Midian." The LORD turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?"” (Jud 6:12-14 NIV)

Gideon is an example of that kind of believer who knows about what the Lord has done in the past, but doubts his ability or will to act in the present. Anyway God's angel commissions Gideon for his task.

Gideon doubted both his ability and the reality of his calling and wanted a sign:

““But Lord," Gideon asked, "how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." The LORD answered, "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together." Gideon replied, "If now I have found favour in your eyes, give me a sign that it is really you talking to me. Please do not go away until I come back and bring my offering and set it before you." And the LORD said, "I will wait until you return." Gideon went in, prepared a young goat, and from an ephah of flour he made bread without yeast. Putting the meat in a basket and its broth in a pot, he brought them out and offered them to him under the oak. The angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened bread, place them on this rock, and pour out the broth." And Gideon did so. With the tip of the staff that was in his hand, the angel of the LORD touched the meat and the unleavened bread. Fire flared from the rock, consuming the meat and the bread. And the angel of the LORD disappeared.” (Jud 6:15-21 NIV)

Before any military action, Gideon's first task was to purify Israel, starting by tearing down his father's altar to Baal and building an altar to Yahweh:

“That same night the LORD said to him, "Take the second bull from your father’s herd, the one seven years old. Tear down your father’s altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside it. Then build a proper kind of altar to the LORD your God on the top of this height. Using the wood of the Asherah pole that you cut down, offer the second bull as a burnt offering.”” (Jud 6:25-26 NIV)

and Gideon did these things. Gideon's father Joash was probably a man of standing in the community because he had a number of servants and had custody of the village altar to Baal. Gideon has to purify at least his own household before he can carry out God's commission. I think we can see a parallel with Moses having to circumcise his son before he delivered Israel. Pagan God's may allow the worship of multiple deities, but Yahweh doesn't – we can worship only him. God's making a spiritual point here too – Israel's bondage to Baal is worse and more serious than their bondage to the Midianites.

The local inhabitants wanted to kill Gideon for this, but perhaps surprisingly his father defended him:

“The men of the town demanded of Joash, "Bring out your son. He must die, because he has broken down Baal’s altar and cut down the Asherah pole beside it." But Joash replied to the hostile crowd around him, "Are you going to plead Baal’s cause? Are you trying to save him? Whoever fights for him shall be put to death by morning! If Baal really is a god, he can defend himself when someone breaks down his altar.”” (Jud 6:30-31 NIV)

The paganisation of Israelite society is absolutely amazing – it seems totally complete. It makes you wonder why Yahweh bothered to save him – he's an amazingly merciful God. Names were incredibly important in those days – they spoke of what you were – and in verse 32 Gideon is renamed Jerud-baal or let baal contend with him. This is like lots of other renaming episodes we've looked at – for example Jacob being renamed Israel.

Having restored some measure of religious purity, Gideon was now ready to fight the Midianites:

“Now all the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples joined forces and crossed over the Jordan and camped in the Valley of Jezreel. Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon, and he blew a trumpet, summoning the Abiezrites to follow him. He sent messengers throughout Manasseh, calling them to arms, and also into Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali, so that they too went up to meet them.” (Jud 6:33-35 NIV)

there's a lesson for us there we need to get ourselves in order with God before we attempt to undertake anything he has commanded us, but we can carry out his calling in the power of His spirit. But Gideon still wasn't satisfied with God's leading he demanded another sign from God:

“Gideon said to God, "If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised— look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing-floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said.”” (Jud 6:36-37 NIV)

and his request was answered:

“And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew—a bowlful of water.” (Jud 6:38 NIV)

This isn't in any way a sign of Gideon's faith it's a sign of his unbelief.

But, Gideon still wasn't satisfied and demanded yet another sign from God – which was again granted by God in his great patience. It's amazing how God can be patient with us and how he can use the most unconfident and unbelieving people to achieve His purposes. What an encouragement to us.

So Gideon finally answers God's call and went off with the Israelites he had summoned to fight the Midianites – but God wanted there to be no doubt in the minds of either Gideon or the Israelites that it was the Lord giving them victory so he reduced the forces that Gideon would have to do battle:

“Early in the morning, Jerub-Baal (that is, Gideon) and all his men camped at the spring of Harod. The camp of Midian was north of them in the valley near the hill of Moreh. The LORD said to Gideon, "You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her, announce now to the people, ‘Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.’” So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained. But the LORD said to Gideon, "There are still too many men. Take them down to the water, and I will sift them out for you there. If I say, ‘This one shall go with you,’ he shall go; but if I say, ‘This one shall not go with you,’ he shall not go.” So Gideon took the men down to the water. There the LORD told him, "Separate those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog from those who kneel down to drink." Three hundred men lapped with their hands to their mouths. All the rest got down on their knees to drink. The LORD said to Gideon, "With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the other men go, each to his own place.”” (Jud 7:1-7 NIV)

and the Lord gave Gideon and the Israelites a great victory:

“Dividing the three hundred men into three companies, he placed trumpets and empty jars in the hands of all of them, with torches inside. "Watch me," he told them. "Follow my lead. When I get to the edge of the camp, do exactly as I do. When I and all who are with me blow our trumpets, then from all around the camp blow yours and shout, ‘For the LORD and for Gideon.’” Gideon and the hundred men with him reached the edge of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just after they had changed the guard. They blew their trumpets and broke the jars that were in their hands. The three companies blew the trumpets and smashed the jars. Grasping the torches in their left hands and holding in their right hands the trumpets they were to blow, they shouted, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!" While each man held his position around the camp, all the Midianites ran, crying out as they fled. When the three hundred trumpets sounded, the LORD caused the men throughout the camp to turn on each other with their swords. The army fled to Beth Shittah towards Zererah as far as the border of Abel Meholah near Tabbath.” (Jud 7:16-22 NIV)

God's spirit has transformed Gideon into a real leader – "watch me" and "follow my lead" and "do exactly as I do".

All that remained was a mopping up operation in which Gideon (perhaps) diplomatically engaged the other Israelites around:

“Israelites from Naphtali, Asher and all Manasseh were called out, and they pursued the Midianites. Gideon sent messengers throughout the hill country of Ephraim, saying, "Come down against the Midianites and seize the waters of the Jordan ahead of them as far as Beth Barah." So all the men of Ephraim were called out and they took the waters of the Jordan as far as Beth Barah. They also captured two of the Midianite leaders, Oreb and Zeeb. They killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb at the winepress of Zeeb. They pursued the Midianites and brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon, who was by the Jordan.” (Jud 7:23-25 NIV)

another interpretation is that he's ignored Yahweh's reduction of his forces and is now acting in his own strength.

The powerful tribe of Ephraim were still angry with Gideon but he diplomatically appeased them:

“Now the Ephraimites asked Gideon, "Why have you treated us like this? Why didn't you call us when you went to fight Midian?" And they criticised him sharply. But he answered them, "What have I accomplished compared to you? Aren't the gleanings of Ephraim's grapes better than the full grape harvest of Abiezer? God gave Oreb and Zeeb, the Midianite leaders, into your hands. What was I able to do compared to you?" At this, their resentment against him subsided.” (Jud 8:1-3 NIV)

Gideon went on to make victory complete by defeating the remaining Midianite army:

“Gideon went up by the route of the nomads east of Nobah and Jogbehah and fell upon the unsuspecting army. Zebah and Zalmunna, the two kings of Midian, fled, but he pursued them and captured them, routing their entire army. Gideon son of Joash then returned from the battle by the Pass of Heres.” (Jud 8:11-13 NIV)

and killing the remaining kings:

“Turning to Jether, his oldest son, he said, "Kill them!" But Jether did not draw his sword, because he was only a boy and was afraid. Zebah and Zalmunna said, "Come, do it yourself. ‘As is the man, so is his strength.’” So Gideon stepped forward and killed them, and took the ornaments off their camels' necks.” (Jud 8:20-21 NIV)

The Israelites now wanted to make Gideon ruler over them, but he refused saying that the LORD was their ruler:

“The Israelites said to Gideon, "Rule over us—you, your son and your grandson—because you have saved us out of the hand of Midian." But Gideon told them, "I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule over you.” (Jud 8:22-23 NIV)

This was very wise as there was no indication of God's anointing of him as king as would have been required (Deuteronomy 7:14-20), and as we shall see when we come to look at Samuel next time, the Israelites would continue to unwisely demand a human ruler over them rather than relying on God as their Lord and King. However, Gideon failed to give Yahweh due credit for the victory over the Midianites. The whole story makes several theological points; (i) Yahweh is God not Baal, (ii) Yahweh not human armies is what triumphs and (iii) Yahweh not Gideon will rule.

### **Samson**

Samson was called by God to deliver Israel from the Philistines:

“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. A certain man of Zorah, named Manoah, from the clan of the Danites, had a wife who was sterile and remained childless. The angel of the LORD appeared to her and said, "You are sterile and childless, but you are going to conceive and have a son. Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink and that you do not eat anything unclean, because you will conceive and give birth to a son. No razor may be used on his head, because the boy 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.” (Jud 13:1-5 NIV)

and

“The woman gave birth to a boy and named him Samson. He grew and the LORD blessed him, and the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him while he was in Mahaneh Dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol.” (Jud 13:24-25 NIV)

As we shall see this is a wonderful story about God intervening purely on the basis of his grace without any merit from the human figures in the story (except perhaps from Sampson's mother – although she seems to have dangerously compromised him by naming him Samson which means "little sun").

But he soon turned away from God's purpose in his life in a move that was to eventually prove his downfall:

“Samson went down to Timnah and saw there a young Philistine woman. When he returned, he said to his father and mother, "I have seen a Philistine woman in Timnah; now get her for me as my wife." His father and mother replied, "Isn't there an acceptable woman among your relatives or among all our people? Must you go to the uncircumcised Philistines to get a wife?" But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me. She's the right one for me.” (Jud 14:1-3 NIV)

Samson's story is filled with irony, in some ways he had the greatest potential of all the judges – but he squandered it. Though Samson is impressive as an individual, he turns out to be anything but a military hero. He never leads Israel out in battle; he never engages the Philistines in martial combat; he never experiences a military victory. All his accomplishments are personal; all his victories, private. He's already violating his Nazirite

status by fraternising with forbidden women. He had the highest calling of all the judges but spent his life doing his own thing.

But God can use all things for his purposes:

“(His parents did not know that this was from the LORD, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines; for at that time they were ruling over Israel.)” (Jud 14:4 NIV)

At the same time the trend in Samuel's life would be all downhill – as we shall see.

After taking his Philistine wife Samuel started to move against her people out of anger because they had solved the riddle he had posed at the wedding feast (having been told the answer by his wife):

“Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power. He went down to Ashkelon, struck down thirty of their men, stripped them of their belongings and gave their clothes to those who had explained the riddle. Burning with anger, he went up to his father’s house.” (Jud 14:19 NIV)

which was the end of that marriage:

“And Samson’s wife was given to the friend who had attended him at his wedding.” (Jud 14:20 NIV)

This made Samson even more angry and he took it out on the Philistines:

“Samson said to them, "This time I have a right to get even with the Philistines; I will really harm them." So he went out and caught three hundred foxes and tied them tail to tail in pairs. He then fastened a torch to every pair of tails, lit the torches and let the foxes loose in the standing corn of the Philistines. He burned up the shocks and standing corn, together with the vineyards and olive groves.” (Jud 15:3-5 NIV)

and the cycle of revenge continued:

“When the Philistines asked, "Who did this?" they were told, "Samson, the Timnite’s son-in-law, because his wife was given to his friend." So the Philistines went up and burned her and her father to death. Samson said to them, "Since you’ve acted like this, I won’t stop until I get my revenge on you." He attacked them viciously and slaughtered many of them. Then he went down and stayed in a cave in the rock of Etam.” (Jud 15:6-8 NIV)

and continued:

“The Philistines went up and camped in Judah, spreading out near Lehi. The men of Judah asked, "Why have you come to fight us?" "We have come to take Samson prisoner," they answered, "to do to him as he did to us." Then three thousand men from Judah went down to the cave in the rock of Etam and said to Samson, "Don’t you realise that the Philistines are rulers over us? What have you done to us?" He answered, "I merely did to them what they did to me.”” (Jud 15:9-11 NIV)

Samson is clearly an arrogant young man with an unpleasant character – but God used him to stir up conflict between the Israelites and the Philistines. The Israelites now hand him over to the Philistines:

“They said to him, "We’ve come to tie you up and hand you over to the Philistines." Samson said, "Swear to me that you won’t kill me yourselves." "Agreed," they answered. "We will only tie you up and hand you over to them. We will not kill you." So they bound him with two new ropes and led him up from the rock.” (Jud 15:12-13 NIV)

The Judahites would rather deliver their countrymen into the hands of the enemy and live under that enemy's domination than fulfill the mandate Yahweh had given them to occupy the land and drive out the enemy.

But God empowered Samson to strike down the Philistines:

"As he approached Lehi, the Philistines came towards him shouting. The Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power. The ropes on his arms became like charred flax, and the bindings dropped from his hands. Finding a fresh jaw-bone of a donkey, he grabbed it and struck down a thousand men. Then Samson said, "With a donkey's jaw-bone I have made donkeys of them. With a donkey's jaw-bone I have killed a thousand men.'" (Jud 15:14-16 NIV) interestingly Samson's use of a jawbone (something derived from a corpse is another violation of his Nazirite vow). Samson claims the victory for himself, he seems unaware of God's involvement in his life.

Apparently Samson did become a leader of Israel:

"Samson led Israel for twenty years in the days of the Philistines." (Jud 15:20 NIV)

But he continued to have problems with women:

"One day Samson went to Gaza, where he saw a prostitute. He went in to spend the night with her." (Jud 16:1 NIV)

and with the woman who was to become his downfall:

"Some time later, he fell in love with a woman in the Valley of Sorek whose name was Delilah. The rulers of the Philistines went to her and said, "See if you can lure him into showing you the secret of his great strength and how we can overpower him so that we may tie him up and subdue him. Each one of us will give you eleven hundred shekels of silver.'" (Jud 16:4-5 NIV)

clearly Samson had learned nothing from his experiences with his first wife. Delilah is offered a huge sum of money to betray Samson and she agrees.

For some time Samson plays with Delilah and doesn't tell her his secrets, but eventually he succumbs:

"Then she said to him, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when you won't confide in me? This is the third time you have made a fool of me and haven't told me the secret of your great strength." With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was tired to death. So he told her everything. "No razor has ever been used on my head," he said, "because I have been a Nazirite set apart to God since birth. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man." When Delilah saw that he had told her everything, she sent word to the rulers of the Philistines, "Come back once more; he has told me everything." So the rulers of the Philistines returned with the silver in their hands." (Jud 16:15-18 NIV)

and is taken by the Philistines:

"Having put him to sleep on her lap, she called a man to shave off the seven braids of his hair, and so began to subdue him. And his strength left him. Then she called, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" He awoke from his sleep and thought, "I'll go out as before and shake myself free." But he did not know that the LORD had left him. Then the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza. Binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding in the prison." (Jud 16:19-21 NIV)

Samson thinks he can deal with the Philistines as he's done in the past, but now the Lord has deserted him his real strength is gone. His experiences with his first wife at Timnah haven't alerted him to the dangers lurking in the Philistine world. In modern terms he's all brawn and no brain. This is a preview of the exile of the Israelite nation which was to come – blinded carried off and set to forced labour.

But, even in spite of his arrogance, unfaithfulness and stupidity God hasn't entirely deserted Samson:

“Now the rulers of the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to celebrate, saying, "Our god has delivered Samson, our enemy, into our hands." When the people saw him, they praised their god, saying, "Our god has delivered our enemy into our hands, the one who laid waste our land and multiplied our slain." While they were in high spirits, they shouted, "Bring out Samson to entertain us." So they called Samson out of the prison, and he performed for them. When they stood him among the pillars, Samson said to the servant who held his hand, "Put me where I can feel the pillars that support the temple, so that I may lean against them." Now the temple was crowded with men and women; all the rulers of the Philistines were there, and on the roof were about three thousand men and women watching Samson perform. Then Samson prayed to the LORD, "O Sovereign LORD, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes." Then Samson reached towards the two central pillars on which the temple stood. Bracing himself against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other, Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines!" Then he pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it. Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived.” (Jud 16:23-30 NIV)

First, the Philistine lords test Delilah: is she a Philistine, or is she Samson's lover? Second, Delilah tests Samson: Does he love her, or is he just teasing her? Like the riddle in 14:14, for Samson this test becomes a trap. Third, Yahweh tests Samson: Will he remain true to his Nazirite vow (vv. 17, 20)? Verses 15–17 contain the keys to the development of this motif as all three tests come together and Samson admits that the game is more than a test of love. Fourth, Yahweh tests Dagon: Can he stand up for himself and his people (vv. 23–30)? Fifth, Samson tests God: Will he intervene to defend his agent in the end (vv. 28–30)? Indeed in this section every speech is a test. As for Samson, the principal character, although he is able to shed the ropes and the web that bound his hair, he fails everyone's tests, ultimately being trapped in his own words.

Yet at the end Samson acknowledges Yahweh, he prays to him and the Lord granted him his revenge even though Samson's prayer was still totally self centered. All Samson had in mind was his own concerns, he has no thought for God's agenda or the fate of his people the Israelites. What a merciful gracious God we have who can answer even our most selfish prayers. Yet what a tragic inversion of Samson's calling, the set-apart Nazirite dies with the uncircumcised Philistines. As he concludes the narrator acknowledges the significance of what Samson has done – he's begun to deliver his people from the Philistines. But the narrator's comment should not be interpreted as a compliment. This is a tragic note. This man, with his unprecedentedly high calling and with his extraordinary divine gifts, has wasted his life. Indeed, he accomplishes more for God dead than alive.

The whole Samson account exposes what happens when men conduct their lives, and particularly their relations with women purely in their own self interest. Samson seems to have regarded and treated women purely as sex objects to be exploited. Samson didn't care



about what his parents wanted or what God wanted. It also exposes the vulnerability of leaders. Samson had great gifting but was led astray by his desire for women. He was driven by lust. Christianity calls for the highest respect for women. When we're called into divine service we have to concentrate on what God wants. Samson just played with his giftings and indulging himself as he (not God) desired. The only positive thing to come out of Samson's life is the gracious intervention of Yahweh who never leaves us nor forsakes us.