



SESSION OBJECTIVE: JUDGES 14:1-20

To understand the unpredictable nature of Samson.

How Does It Work?

There are many things in the world that are relatively predictable. Mathematics, for example, is a discipline of predictable outcomes because it follows rigorous laws. Specific linguistic features in language dialects are considered predictable because they follow syntactic rules that dictate how a word will be formed and what it will sound like in any given phonetic or morphological environment. There are also many unpredictable aspects of the world. For example, while our knowledge of tornadoes has grown, we still know very little about them. The National Geographic reports, “Tornadoes remain deadly and relatively *unpredictable*, despite recent advancements in weather science.”

In the book of Judges, we see these same kind of patterns. On the one hand, God is very predictable. He operates out of an objective law that is always binding and never-changing. On the other hand, the judges are ruthless and unpredictable, none more perhaps than Samson. As we discovered in Session 11, Samson’s life begins with a very specific and set-apart purpose. He is born into the Nazirite vow, a vow that is usually taken voluntarily by adults. His purpose is announced to Manoah and his wife by an angel (Jg. 13:2-14). After Samson was born “the young man grew, and the LORD blessed him. And the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him” (Jg. 13:24b-25a). Things seemed to be going well. However, Samson’s story digresses into the same kind of recklessness that we would expect from a judge by now. His decline can be seen in his actions starting in chapter 14.

Knowing the Difference

Samson's story is confusing to some because while he makes a number of mistakes he is often accused of wrongs that are actually right, and then dismissed for actions that appear harmless but are actually wrong. Below is a breakdown of each category.

THE PHILISTINE WIFE

Chapter 14 begins with Samson traveling to Timnah. Timnah was located on the northern border of Judah, but was apparently during the time of the judges mostly occupied by the Philistines, the same people group who had been oppressing the Israelites during Samson's time. Samson sees a young woman there and desires to marry her (Jg. 14:2). Verse 3 reveals his parents' reaction to this: "But his father and mother said to him, "Is there not a woman among the daughters of your relatives, or among all our people, that you must go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me, for she is right in my eyes." Their trepidation initially seems in good keeping with Jewish law, but upon further inspection it is suspect. They don't seem to be interested in any covenantal violation, but instead emphasize only cultural reasons for why this union is not a good idea.

This is a tricky detail in Samson's story to interpret. Some have argued that Samson violates the laws on intermarriage with foreigners based on Deuteronomy 7:1-7. Others have countered that argument by rightly identifying that there are only specifically seven nations mentioned in Deuteronomy 7:1-7 that the Jews were to avoid marriage with, and they were all Canaanite people groups. However, upon further investigation of the Old Testament, it becomes clear that these seven groups are not meant to be taken exclusively, but rather as a roundabout way of saying all nations. Seven is a perfect number in Hebrew and the usage of it here is significant. Furthermore, there are other passages that indicate that the Israelites understood this list to mean more than specifically the seven mentioned. For example, in 1 Kings 11:1-2, it is said that Solomon unlawfully married many foreign women. The list includes "Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite" (1 Kg. 11:1), and then it says, "from the nations concerning which the LORD had said to the people of Israel, 'You shall not enter into marriage with them'" (1 Kg. 11:2). However, only the Hittites are specifically forbidden in Deuteronomy 7. Additionally, Nehemiah speaks against unlawful marriages to Ashdodite, Ammonite, and Moabite women. The point is that Deuteronomy 7 forbids intermarriage with foreigners in general.

However, the plot thickens in verse 4: "His father and mother did not know that it was from the LORD, for he was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines ruled over Israel." This particular marriage, while usually unlawful, was ordained by God in order to seek an advantage over the Philistines. The purpose of outlawing such marriages was to prevent syncretism from occurring. Syncretism is the blending of religions. In order for the people of Israel to remain pure (a necessity in order to produce the Messiah), God prevented intermarriage to eliminate the inevitable idolatry from occurring. However, in this instance, God arranges the marriage in order to allow Israel to strike against the Philistines, not merge with them. This is not a change in plans or a reversal of previous commandments, but a specific moment for a specific and set-apart judge to gain a military advantage of the enemy of God's people.

THE LION AND HONEY

While on their way to Timnah to arrange the marriage, Samson and his father are met with a wild lion. Lions do not strike the same kind of fear into us in our modern context as they did in the ancient world. Lions were dreadful foes. Because of their superior hunting skills and overpowering strength, an average human had no real chance at defeating a lion. However, Samson is no average human. Being carried by the Spirit of God,

“although he had nothing in his hand, he tore the lion in pieces as one tears a young goat.” Samson demonstrates supernatural strength and easily kills the lion with his bare hands.

Some days after this, he returned to Timnah to take this woman as his bride, and he saw the dead lion. To his surprise, there were bees and honey inside the carcass. The imagery here is not a consequence. First, one would expect to find maggots and worms inside of a dead carcass, not bees and honey. This indicates an act of God in some way. It also shows a picture of what the people of God are supposed to be like - blossoming life and community in the midst of death and decay. The word for, “swarm” in verse 8 is unique as it literally means, “community or congregation,” and is not the typical word for swarm. Everywhere else it is used it is with reference to people. It pictures the congregation of God’s people blossoming in the dying and decaying world full of sin.

Samson violates God’s laws in three different ways. For one, contact with anything that is dead renders one unclean (Lev. 11:24-25). Second, as a Nazirite he is forbidden to touch any cadaver (Nub. 6:6). Third, he lures his parents into the unclean act of eating the honey unbeknownst to them. This is the first act (of many) that demonstrates the unpredictable nature of Samson. He is carried by the Spirit to kill the lion, he is obedient to God’s will to marry a Philistine woman in order to seek an advantage over the enemy, but he also lives recklessly and endangers those around him. He is a walking contradiction.

THE RIDDLE

Samson then uses this experience to entrap the Philistines with a riddle, and for three days they cannot solve it: “Out of the eater came something to eat // Out of the strong came something sweet” (Jg. 14:14). The people could not possibly know the answer to this riddle, as no one was with Samson in the vineyard when he killed the lion and took the honey. The people blackmail his wife for the answer by threatening to kill her parents (Jg. 14:15), and she begins to emotionally appeal to him (Jg. 14:16-17). After seven days, he finally tells her the riddle, and she immediately tells the people in order to protect her family (Jg. 14:17). The men wait until the final moment to solve the riddle, and Samson immediately knows what has happened. He doesn’t even care that his defiling act with the lion and honey has been uncovered. He answers them with yet another riddle, essentially accusing them of cheating while simultaneously referring to his wife as a heifer (Jg. 14:19).

Having lost the riddle challenge, he now owes them “thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothes” (Jg. 14:12). In a show of disrespect, “he went down to Ashkelon and struck down thirty men of the town and took their spoil and gave the garments to those who had told the riddle” (Jg. 14:19). What is more intimidating than to give the spoil of dead men you killed singlehandedly? He is able to do this because “the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him,” which sets up an important question: Why does the Spirit of God rush upon him though he has just broken the Nazirite vow yet again? Either God demonstrating grace to Samson (multiple times to be sure), or He is forbearing Samson with patience until His plan of dominating the Philistines has come to pass. As we will find out, Samson eventually is met with the consequences of his recklessness. In the meantime, his wife is given to his companion by her father, which sets up the conflict in the next chapter (Jg. 14:20).

What About Now?

One takeaway from this week’s study is that unpredictability, at least in this case, never leads to godliness. Second, whenever we willfully disregard God’s commands, it works out poorly for us. Proverbs 13:18 says, “Poverty and disgrace come to him who ignores instruction, but whoever heeds reproof is honored.” Samson

lives for himself and does what he pleases, and already the fruit of that behavior has shown itself to be sour. Though he is obedient to God in some cases (killing the lion, marrying the woman for tactical advantage), his obedience does not overcome his sin. That's never how it works. Sin is always and only overcome by God's grace, and that grace is found in the Savior Jesus Christ.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Judges 14:1-3. Where did Samson go? What did he find there and what did he ask of his father and mother as a result? What was their response to him?

2. Read Judges 14:4. What did his father and mother not understand about this marriage? Why is this significant given he was wanting to marry a Philistine? (Hint: See above notes)

Day Two

1. Read Judges 14:5-7. What happened when Samson came to the vineyard? Did he tell anyone what happened? How did he feel about the woman he was interested in marrying?

2. Read Judges 14:8-9. After some days, what did he do? When he came to the carcass of the lion, what did he find in it? Why was this odd? According to the above notes, what three ways did he sin?

Day Three

1. Read Judges 14:10-14. What did Samson propose to the Philistine men? What were the stakes of the wager? What was the riddle he gave them?

2. Read Judges 14:15-17. What happened on the fourth day of the wager? What did the men say to Samson's wife? What did she say to him in turn? Did he eventually give in?

Day Four

1. Read Judges 14:18. When did the men answer the riddle? How did Samson respond?

2. Read Judges 14:19-20. What did Samson do to procure the thirty clothing garments he owed as a result of losing the wager? What did his wife's father do while he was gone?
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Week 12 Discussion: My Way

From the very beginning of his actual narrative, Samson demonstrates the desire to do things his way even if they are hostile to God's ways. His marriage is a part of God's plan, but his lack of regard for the uncleanness of the dead lion and the honey in the carcass, and the deception in giving it to his father reveal that he doesn't really care about God's law. He also lashes out at the Ashkelons and ruthlessly kills 30 men to rob them so he can repay his debts, indicating he puts no premium on human life. Talk as a group about how this kind of thinking can lead to destruction.

1. Icebreaker: Do you struggle with doing things your way?
2. In what areas of your life do you most struggle with relinquishing control?
3. How has doing things "your way" worked out well for you?
4. How has doing things "your way" worked out badly for you?
5. Would people describe you as someone who is controlling or not? Why?
6. How can the church help you navigate decisions and lead you to God's way over your own?

Takeaways:

1. Samson's marriage to the Philistine woman, while forbidden, was ordained for a special purpose.
2. Samson's behavior indicates he is unpredictable and only concerned for himself.

PRAYER REQUESTS: