

JUDGES—WEEK 11

SOMETHING BIG IS AT HAND



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is Samson and the Lion by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553)
On display in the Schlossmuseum, Weimar, Germany*

Jephthah finishes his ministry with a flourish, holding the Ephraimites to account. Then Israel gets a few “less than great” judges. After many years of Philistine rule, the Angel of the LORD shows up to announce a special child.

He will be a lifelong Nazarite.

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Joshua, Week 11 — Something Big is at Hand

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1 Judges 12:1–7

Then the men of Ephraim gathered together, crossed over toward Zaphon, and said to Jephthah, “Why did you cross over to fight against the people of Ammon, and did not call us to go with you? We will burn your house down on you with fire!”

And Jephthah said to them, “My people and I were in a great struggle with the people of Ammon; and when I called you, you did not deliver me out of their hands. So when I saw that you would not deliver me, I took my life in my hands and crossed over against the people of Ammon; and the LORD delivered them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me?” Now Jephthah gathered together all the men of Gilead and fought against Ephraim. And the men of Gilead defeated Ephraim, because they said, “You Gileadites are fugitives of Ephraim among the Ephraimites and among the Manassites.” The Gileadites seized the fords of the Jordan before the Ephraimites arrived. And when any Ephraimite who escaped said, “Let me cross over,” the men of Gilead would say to him, “Are you an Ephraimite?” If he said, “No,” then they would say to him, “Then say, ‘Shibboleth!’” And he would say, “Sibboleth,” for he could not pronounce it right. Then they would take him and kill him at the fords of the Jordan. There fell at that time forty-two thousand Ephraimites.

And Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried among the cities of Gilead.

If this sounds familiar, it’s because it is. The Ephraimites made the same complaint to Gideon.

Now the men of Ephraim said to him, “Why have you done this to us by not calling us when you went to fight with the Midianites?” And they reprimanded him sharply. — Judges 8:1

Gideon put up with this nonsense and even went the extra mile to smooth things over. Jephthah, who we’ve already seen knows his history, is having none of it. Their complaint is ridiculous anyway; it was Gilead who asked him to be their leader; Ephraim wasn’t involved. And the threat to burn Jephthah’s house down adds the perfect personal touch.

So, no diplomacy this time. Jephthah tells Ephraim to pound sand, then gives them a thorough beat down.

This sad battle of Israelite against Israelite at least gave us a wonderful English colloquialism.

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/shibboleth>

And do not miss how shameful this was.

And when any Ephraimite who escaped said, “Let me cross over,” the men of Gilead would say to him, “Are you an Ephraimite?” If he said, “No,” then they would say to him, “Then say, ‘Shibboleth!’”

The Ephraimites were denying they were Ephraimites. That’s pathetic.

But their dialect gave them away.

2 Judges 12:8–13:1

After him, Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel. He had thirty sons. And he gave away thirty daughters in marriage, and brought in thirty daughters from elsewhere for his sons. He judged Israel seven years. Then Ibzan died and was buried at Bethlehem.

After him, Elon the Zebulunite judged Israel. He judged Israel ten years. And Elon the Zebulunite died and was buried at Aijalon in the country of Zebulun.

After him, Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite judged Israel. He had forty sons and thirty grandsons, who rode on seventy young donkeys. He judged Israel eight years. Then Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite died and was buried in Pirathon in the land of Ephraim, in the mountains of the Amalekites.

Again the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD delivered them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years.

This time we get three judges who rule for a total of twenty-five years—followed by forty years of Philistine rule.

But there's something disturbing about these judges. The only details we get about them are signs of secular wealth and excess. Ibzan had sixty children. Abdon *had forty sons and thirty grandsons, who rode on seventy young donkeys.*

That's just what Israel needs in a servant-leader to make them truly holy—lots of kids and donkeys.

I jest, but this hints at a problem we're all too aware of—super-rich Christian leaders.

Our society condemns people for being wealthy, even if they made their money honestly through hard work and genius. Great golfers and tennis players, even chess grandmasters, win big purses from tournaments. Yet their wealth is resented. That's ridiculous, but it's still a real thing in our society.

Pastors work incredibly hard, and they have stresses beyond what most people know, but a pastor shouldn't be driving a Rolls Royce. That just looks bad, plus it plays into the hands of God's enemies.

And this gets to the heart of today's lesson. The trappings of wealth of Ibzan and Abdon are all we know about them. They seem to have made a point of showing off. They acted like royalty. We've seen what that kind of attitude did to Abimelech.

A pastor can have a solid retirement fund saved up and that's not a problem. Book royalties can turn into a huge pile of money, and that's okay too. They earned it.

But showing off wealth with conspicuous bling is in clear violation of scripture. A pastor who does that is comfortable with doing damage to God's glory and to the cause of spreading the gospel.

How can someone seriously confess Jesus as their Lord and then do that?

3 Judges 13:2–7

Now there was a certain man from Zorah, of the family of the Danites, whose name was Manoah; and his wife was barren and had no children. And the Angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, “Indeed now, you are barren and have borne no children, but you shall conceive and bear a son. Now therefore, please be careful not to drink wine or similar drink, and not to eat anything unclean. For behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. And no razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb; and he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines.”

So the woman came and told her husband, saying, “A Man of God came to me, and His countenance was like the countenance of the Angel of God, very awesome; but I did not ask Him where He was from, and He did not tell me His name. And He said to me, ‘Behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. Now drink no wine or similar drink, nor eat anything unclean, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb to the day of his death.’ ”

This isn't just any angel; it's *the Angel of the LORD*. The NKJV capitalizes angel in this case because the Angel of the LORD is, for all practical purposes, God Himself. This is one of those things that's beyond human comprehension, but scripture makes this clear on multiple occasions. From the very first reference in Genesis 16:7–13 on, the Angel of the LORD speaks as God in the first person.

Then the Angel of the Lord said to her, “I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude.”— Genesis 16:10

“I” in that verse has to be God. No one else can do that.

But notice that Manoah's wife calls Him, “*a Man of God*” and says that, “*His countenance was like the countenance of the Angel of God, very awesome.*”

It doesn't cross her mind that He is what He looks like.

This lifelong Nazarite vow is a significant enhancement of the original.

Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘When either a man or woman consecrates an offering to take the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the LORD, he shall separate himself from wine and similar drink; he shall drink neither vinegar made from wine nor vinegar made from similar drink; neither shall he drink any grape juice, nor eat fresh grapes or raisins. All the days of his separation he shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, from seed to skin.

‘All the days of the vow of his separation no razor shall come upon his head; until the days are fulfilled for which he separated himself to the Lord, he shall be holy.’ ” — Numbers 6:1–5a

Notice that a Nazarite vow is temporary. The three references to “*the days*” near the end of the Numbers 6 passage make this clear.

This will be a Nazarite on steroids.

4 Judges 13:8–14

Then Manoah prayed to the LORD, and said, “O my Lord, please let the Man of God whom You sent come to us again and teach us what we shall do for the child who will be born.”

And God listened to the voice of Manoah, and the Angel of God came to the woman again as she was sitting in the field; but Manoah her husband was not with her. Then the woman ran in haste and told her husband, and said to him, “Look, the Man who came to me the other day has just now appeared to me!”

So Manoah arose and followed his wife. When he came to the Man, he said to Him, “Are You the Man who spoke to this woman?”

And He said, “I am.”

Manoah said, “Now let Your words come to pass! What will be the boy’s rule of life, and his work?”

So the Angel of the LORD said to Manoah, “Of all that I said to the woman let her be careful. She may not eat anything that comes from the vine, nor may she drink wine or similar drink, nor eat anything unclean. All that I commanded her let her observe.”

Many of the events in scripture are glorious and comical at the same time. Manoah’s prayer is answered beautifully and the Angel of the LORD appears to Manoah’s wife again. Then she bolts, leaving Him just standing there.

Of course, He’s God, and He knows what’s going on, but it’s amusing to imagine Him patiently twiddling His thumbs waiting for her return. As we’ll soon see, He’s going to reveal Himself and blow their minds.

But for a few minutes, He has to just sit tight until they return.

Manoah finally shows up and sounds like the king of silly questions. He asks the Angel of the LORD if He’s the same guy that showed up yesterday. It’s the perfect set up for a comical comeback like, “No. That was my twin brother.” Or even, “Someone was here yesterday?!?”

But the Angel of the LORD is there on serious business and plays it straight saying, *“I am.”*

All kidding aside, Manoah’s questioning is actually excellent in an important way—posture. He’s asking in the way a servant should ask his Lord. Manoah’s pumping Him for information, but he’s not pushing Him to do anything in conformity with Manoah’s will. That’s the correct posture when dealing with the Almighty.

This explains what happens next. Manoah asks, *“What will be the boy’s rule of life, and his work?”* It seems that the Angel ignores the question, but He really just edits it. Manoah asks for the information he thinks he needs. The Angel gives him the information he actually needs. She must avoid eating grapes, drinking wine or similar drink, or eating anything unclean. That’s what’s important; nothing else matters.

He’s answering Manoah’s original prayer, *“Teach us what we shall do for the child who will be born.”*

5 Judges 13:15–25

Then Manoah said to the Angel of the LORD, “Please let us detain You, and we will prepare a young goat for You.”

And the Angel of the LORD said to Manoah, “Though you detain Me, I will not eat your food. But if you offer a burnt offering, you must offer it to the LORD.” (For Manoah did not know He was the Angel of the LORD.)

Then Manoah said to the Angel of the LORD, “What is Your name, that when Your words come to pass we may honor You?”

And the Angel of the LORD said to him, “Why do you ask My name, seeing it is wonderful?”

So Manoah took the young goat with the grain offering, and offered it upon the rock to the LORD. And He did a wondrous thing while Manoah and his wife looked on— it happened as the flame went up toward heaven from the altar—the Angel of the LORD ascended in the flame of the altar! When Manoah and his wife saw this, they fell on their faces to the ground. When the Angel of the LORD appeared no more to Manoah and his wife, then Manoah knew that He was the Angel of the LORD.

And Manoah said to his wife, “We shall surely die, because we have seen God!”

But his wife said to him, “If the LORD had desired to kill us, He would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering from our hands, nor would He have shown us all these things, nor would He have told us such things as these at this time.”

So the woman bore a son and called his name Samson; and the child grew, and the LORD blessed him. And the Spirit of the LORD began to move upon him at Mahaneh Dan between Zorah and Eshtaol.

Manoah tries to respond to the Angel’s commands with hospitality. He recognizes the Angel as an authority and is willing to follow his commands. But the Angel is more than just *an* authority; He’s *the* author of all things. It’s time for the big reveal.

So, He declines the offer of a feast by suggesting a sacrifice to the LORD. Manoah is happy to do that but stays curious. *“What is Your name, that when Your words come to pass we may honor You?”*

The Angel’s response is puzzling. *“Why do you ask My name, seeing it is wonderful?”*

It seems that the Angel is refusing to answer Manoah’s question.

But what happens next answers it better than words ever could.

This scares the bejeebers out of Manoah and he thinks they’re about to die, but his wife does an impressive job of applying logic. Their dying now wouldn’t fit what just happened.

She’s known from the get-go that whatever this is, it’s definitely some kind of blessing.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. When are diplomacy and mercy not the right thing to do?

2. Which Christians are showing too much bling?

3. "Nazarite" is based on the Hebrew word for consecrate or dedicate. Have you ever done something for a time (e.g. fast) to consecrate the time to the LORD?

4. How can we pray with better "posture"?

5. When have you known something was a blessing regardless of the details?

Items for prayer: