

JUDGES—WEEK 12

A GIFT DESPISED



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*

As a special lifelong Nazarite, Samson has outrageous strength, as well as other gifts that are harder to quantify. But he is impetuous and doesn't seem to care about his gifts. He even breaks his Nazarite vow—for no good reason.

He doesn't care.

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Joshua, Week 12 — A Gift Despised
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1 Judges 14:1–4

Now Samson went down to Timnah, and saw a woman in Timnah of the daughters of the Philistines. So he went up and told his father and mother, saying, “I have seen a woman in Timnah of the daughters of the Philistines; now therefore, get her for me as a wife.”

Then his father and mother said to him, “Is there no woman among the daughters of your brethren, or among all my people, that you must go and get a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?”

And Samson said to his father, “Get her for me, for she pleases me well.”

But his father and mother did not know that it was of the LORD—that He was seeking an occasion to move against the Philistines. For at that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel.

Samson sounds like an impetuous teenager. He *is* an impetuous teenager. His manner towards his parents borders on not honoring thy father and thy mother. This is especially curious given that he needs his parents to get the Philistine girl as his wife. Apparently, he can’t just woo her himself. Honoring thy father and thy mother is built into their culture, but Samson does the bare minimum.

Samson—the Nazarite on steroids—will be known for his strength, not so much for his wisdom. His parents sound like they’re trying to raise him right, but it’s a struggle.

Recall that the Angel of the LORD’s instructions to them were solely about the Nazarite rules. He said nothing about what they should teach him, nor did He warn them about what was coming.

But then, in the last paragraph, we get a curious twist. This isn’t just some random act by an impetuous teenager. Nor is it about Samson’s lack of wisdom. The LORD is up to something. He always seems to be up to something.

“But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good.” — Genesis 50:20a

God always seems to be up to something. Does anything happen outside of His will? The reformed view says, “No.”

There’s an explanation for this view that’s easy to say but hard to understand—God is outside of time. This is a point of wondrous agreement between the Bible and science. God’s dominion over time is all over scripture. My favorite examples are 2 Timothy 1:9 and Titus 1:2.

And there’s also a scientific fact about the nature of time (called time dilation) that implies that the creator must have dominion over time (because there can’t be a universal clock). Here’s a good reference.

<https://www.space.com/time-is-relative-twin-paradox>

Being outside of time erases the difference between the past and the future. God sees the entire span of history at once. Thus, He isn’t subject to the rules of probability. He knows all things with certainty.

2 Judges 14:5–9 (ESV)

Then Samson went down with his father and mother to Timnah, and they came to the vineyards of Timnah. And behold, a young lion came toward him roaring. Then the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and although he had nothing in his hand, he tore the lion in pieces as one tears a young goat. But he did not tell his father or his mother what he had done. Then he went down and talked with the woman, and she was right in Samson's eyes.

After some days he returned to take her. And he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion, and behold, there was a swarm of bees in the body of the lion, and honey. He scraped it out into his hands and went on, eating as he went. And he came to his father and mother and gave some to them, and they ate. But he did not tell them that he had scraped the honey from the carcass of the lion.

The Samson era will be relentlessly different from all the previous ones. It started out different.

One thing that's missing that all the others had—Israel crying out to the LORD for relief from their oppressors. This time, the Israelites accommodated their oppression and didn't cry out.

That explains a lot. Samson getting a wife from the Philistines seems absurd, but it's not. The Israelites were mingling with the Philistines. They had been assimilated.

So, Samson comes to visit Timnah and that's no big deal—except for the lion! Even that is no big deal to Samson. You'd think that after his battle with a lion, he'd want to tell the tale of what just happened.

But he keeps the whole thing secret, even from his parents. This will turn out to be important.

After some time Samson returns to see his fiancé. This is so ordinary that he takes a detour to see what became of the lion he killed. Oddly enough, he finds a beehive in the carcass, which is highly unusual—unusual enough to make one wonder what's going on.

And, sure enough, something is going on. What Samson does next is the key to the whole story. He touches the body of the dead lion. That breaks the Nazarite vow.

“When either a man or a woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the LORD, ... All the days of his separation he shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, not even the seeds or the skins. ... he shall not go near a dead body.” — Numbers 6:2b,4, 6b (ESV)

Samson's cavalier attitude about the Nazarite vow is astonishing. Samson shouldn't have been in a vineyard in the first place. The lion may have been sent by God to distract him from breaking the vow by eating grapes.

Overpowering a lion isn't normal, and Samson knows why he's not normal. He has an incredible gift, but he doesn't seem to care. Keeping the vow isn't all that burdensome, yet he tosses it.

If he'd told his parents where he got the honey they would have flipped out.

3 Judges 14:10–15 (ESV)

His father went down to the woman, and Samson prepared a feast there, for so the young men used to do. As soon as the people saw him, they brought thirty companions to be with him. And Samson said to them, “Let me now put a riddle to you. If you can tell me what it is, within the seven days of the feast, and find it out, then I will give you thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothes, but if you cannot tell me what it is, then you shall give me thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothes.” And they said to him, “Put your riddle, that we may hear it.” And he said to them,

*“Out of the eater came something to eat.
Out of the strong came something sweet.”*

And in three days they could not solve the riddle.

On the fourth day they said to Samson’s wife, “Entice your husband to tell us what the riddle is, lest we burn you and your father’s house with fire. Have you invited us here to impoverish us?”

Remember, the point of all this is God’s plan to find *an occasion to move against the Philistines*. The *thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothes* are insignificant. That wager is just a ruse to get everyone to disclose their loyalties.

We don’t know why Samson posed this silly riddle, but the Philistines’ reaction to it is shockingly depraved. *“Entice your husband to tell us what the riddle is, lest we burn you and your father’s house with fire.”*

Seriously?

Treating the Israelites like this would be bad enough, but this is how they treat their own—and over an insignificant issue too.

But remember that the lesson here—and a main theme of the whole Old Testament—isn’t just *their* depravity; it’s *everyone’s* depravity. Specifically, the riddle is silly, but the bet based on the riddle is something more. What’s going on with this?

In our culture, we sometimes add a wager to, say, a golf round, “to make it interesting.”

Time out. Why does it need to be made “interesting?” If it’s not interesting, why are we doing it in the first place? More importantly, why does a wager make things interesting? It turns a friendly game into something seriously competitive. What’s interesting about that?

There’s a real answer, and it’s worth meditating on; it introduces stress. That’s exactly what happened with Samson’s bet. They said, *“Have you invited us here to impoverish us?”* Stress is, by definition, something we can’t ignore. Our biochemical responses are designed to keep us from ignoring stress.

That definitely makes it interesting.

4 Judges 14:16–20

Then Samson’s wife wept on him, and said, “You only hate me! You do not love me! You have posed a riddle to the sons of my people, but you have not explained it to me.”

And he said to her, “Look, I have not explained it to my father or my mother; so should I explain it to you?” Now she had wept on him the seven days while their feast lasted. And it happened on the seventh day that he told her, because she pressed him so much. Then she explained the riddle to the sons of her people. So the men of the city said to him on the seventh day before the sun went down:

*“What is sweeter than honey?
And what is stronger than a lion?”*

And he said to them:

*“If you had not plowed with my heifer,
You would not have solved my riddle!”*

Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon him mightily, and he went down to Ashkelon and killed thirty of their men, took their apparel, and gave the changes of clothing to those who had explained the riddle. So his anger was aroused, and he went back up to his father’s house. And Samson’s wife was given to his companion, who had been his best man.

Note why Samson told his wife the secret of the riddle. *And it happened on the seventh day that he told her, because she pressed him so much.*

Samson did not do this because the Spirit of the LORD had informed him of God’s grand strategy. No, he was just a normal guy caving in to his wife.

And his reaction to their solving the riddle is pretty normal too. He uses a cute colloquialism, but there’s nothing amazing about his figuring out how they got the answer.

Then, and only then, does he get another dose of the Spirit of the LORD, with which he strikes Ashkelon like a hurricane.

There’s a lesson for us in Samson’s on again, off again relationship with the Holy Spirit. Despite his unique Nazarite heritage, and his amazing gifts, he’s still not driving the train.

Samson doesn’t know what’s coming next; he’s just following along. He makes some big mistakes along the way too.

So do we. That’s the point. Serving God is an imperfect exercise, done by imperfect people.

But He still uses it for His glory.

5 Judges 15:1–8

After a while, in the time of wheat harvest, it happened that Samson visited his wife with a young goat. And he said, “Let me go in to my wife, into her room.” But her father would not permit him to go in.

Her father said, “I really thought that you thoroughly hated her; therefore I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister better than she? Please, take her instead.”

And Samson said to them, “This time I shall be blameless regarding the Philistines if I harm them!” Then Samson went and caught three hundred foxes; and he took torches, turned the foxes tail to tail, and put a torch between each pair of tails. When he had set the torches on fire, he let the foxes go into the standing grain of the Philistines, and burned up both the shocks and the standing grain, as well as the vineyards and olive groves.

Then the Philistines said, “Who has done this?”

And they answered, “Samson, the son-in-law of the Timnite, because he has taken his wife and given her to his companion.” So the Philistines came up and burned her and her father with fire.

Samson said to them, “Since you would do a thing like this, I will surely take revenge on you, and after that I will cease.” So he attacked them hip and thigh with a great slaughter; then he went down and dwelt in the cleft of the rock of Etam.

Three things jump out here. First, catching foxes isn't a feat of strength; it's a feat of quickness, and maybe cleverness. Second, the Spirit of the LORD doesn't “come upon” Samson this time. Third, Samson says, “*This time I shall be blameless regarding the Philistines if I harm them!*” Who “blamed” him the last time?

Samson's quickness might answer a question left over from his encounter with the lion—“How come he wasn't covered in scratches?” It one thing to defeat the great cat, but to come away without a scratch? Not telling anyone what happened would be hard to do if you look like you'd just been in a cat-fight.

So, it seems that Samson is more than just strong. Furthermore, his quickness seems to be permanent.

Samson's offhand mention of being blameless “this time” hints at a behind-the-scenes accountability relationship. That relationship might be with his parents; we heard them “parenting” him earlier. Or it could be with the Spirit of the LORD; there's definitely a connection there. Or, it might just be that his conscience started bothering him after his attack on Ashkelon.

It isn't important which kind of guilt trip Samson was subjected to. If it was important, scripture would have included it.

What is important is that he got lit somehow.

There's more to Samson than just speed and strength.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Does the LORD always seem to be up to something?
2. What "gifts" do we underappreciate?
3. Are friendly bets really friendly?
4. When has a mistake been for the good?
5. What famous person is much more than their signature skill?

Items for prayer: