

Judges 13 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.

² A certain man of Zorah, named Manoah, from the clan of the Danites, had a wife who was childless, unable to give birth. ³ The angel of the Lord appeared to her and said, “You are barren and childless, but you are going to become pregnant and give birth to a son. ⁴ Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink and that you do not eat anything unclean. ⁵ You will become pregnant and have a son whose head is never to be touched by a razor because the boy is to be a Nazirite, dedicated to God from the womb. He will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines.”

²⁴ The woman gave birth to a boy and named him Samson. He grew and the Lord blessed him, ²⁵ and the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him while he was in Mahaneh Dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol.

This is the Word of the Lord...

Brothers and sisters of the Lord Jesus Christ, boys and girls,

It’s hard to stay focussed on the Lord, isn’t it? There are so many distractions in our world and in our lives. Time and again, history reveals that God’s people have trouble keeping focused on him.

The very first word of Judges 13 makes this clear: *Again*. It happened many times before. “*Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord...*” This is the fifth and final time that refrain is heard in the book of the Judges. It is important, just like two other refrains in this book: “*In those days Israel had no king*” and “*Everyone did as he saw fit*” or as another translation has it, “*Each one did what was right in his own eyes.*” When we are rightly focussed on the Lord, we seek to do what is right in his eyes, not our own!

Earlier in the book of Judges we are given clues as to what Israel was doing wrong and how it happened that her vision—and her heart—got misdirected. In chapter 3:5-7, for example, we read,

Jdg 3:5-7 The Israelites lived among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. They took their daughters in marriage and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods.

The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord; they forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and Asherahs.

Two things are crystal clear in those verses: Israel got too cozy with their neighbours, intermarried with them and let those neighbours lead them to serve idols.

The Danger of the Promised Land

So consider, first of all, the Danger of the Promised Land.

Ironically, the Land of Milk and Honey proved to be too good for many people. But that isn't God's fault. It's the peoples' own doing. I think this is something which can happen so easily. Do you think so? When people have it all—like we do—we quickly forget the blessings of God. When we get the riches of this world handed to us on a silver platter, then many people forget about the One who gave it to them and forsake the Lord. We enjoy many wonderful things today, but we can easily fall into the trap of forgetting that every good and perfect gift comes from the Lord God. We see other people living life for their own pleasure without regard for God. And then our sinful nature thinks we can do fine without God too.

It happened in the Promised Land with God's people. It didn't happen overnight. It was a gradual process. After the first generation died off—the people who saw God act mightily in giving them the land—then the next generations slowly forgot about the struggles of the past and the awesome power of the Lord displayed. The children did not live through the conquest when things like the walls of Jericho came crashing down before their eyes by God's divine power. As Israel settled into the land, she slowly began to cozy up to people who didn't live the way God wanted. These neighbours did what was right in their own eyes and Israel began to do the same. As we just read from Judges 3, *they forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and Asherahs.*

How about us? We may be tempted to do the same. We want to get close to our neighbours. And that in itself is a good thing. We obviously need to love our neighbours! Just love them. Don't treat them like a project as in loving them in order to win them over to Jesus. Love them with the love of Jesus that flows out of you. Our calling is to be lights in the world that reflect the light and love of Jesus in us. Sometimes, though, isn't it true that we get attracted to the life of unbelievers? Isn't that true young people? Of course it is! I have been there. I've been there way too many times! Not only when I was young, but still at this age! It's a constant battle, I think. In fairness, though, it's not always a conscious decision we make. Oh, we make it. But it just happens bit by bit and, before we know it, we are living just like unbelieving people, except we go to church.

Boys and girls, I don't want you to do what I'm about to tell you. I'm pretty sure I would have done this myself as a kid if I knew about it. But this is one of those "Don't try this at home" stories. I've been told that if you put a frog in a pan of cold water and then put that pan on the stove and slowly bring it to a boil, the frog won't notice. He'll just stay in the water and get boiled to death without even trying to jump out. The frog doesn't notice the change of temperature—he doesn't recognize the danger—and it costs him his life.

God's people need to be aware that every wonderful thing we enjoy comes from God. It's all grace. But there are dangers around us as well. Satan is always looking for ways to tempt us, whether it's through friends, or the media, or fame or fortune or business deals or pleasure or anything else. He slowly turns up the heat around us and hopes we won't notice. For example, our neighbours invite us to do things that appear to be fun, so we say yes. But too often we don't even ask if what we're about to do will

really please God. We just think, "Well, my friends enjoy it, so I will too!" We forget that pleasure-seeking or self-gratification is one of the gods of our society, a god that can lead us away from the Lord. That's true of all the permissiveness we see on our TVs and all throughout society. People follow their own desires and call everything good if they like it. Their god is their own desires. The danger is that we, like the Israelites, become so influenced by the culture around us that we start to live for the same things as everyone else. We accept their ways of living without consulting God's word. And before long we are so comfortable with our neighbours that—like Israel—we see no reason why our young people shouldn't marry those nice neighbour kids just because they serve a different god.

So, Israel's waywardness is a result of living too closely with the Canaanites. It's not even a question of proximity. It's a question of attraction and an unwillingness to be discerning and different. It's about not remembering our calling as God's people, not desiring to take up our cross and follow Jesus. Israel had been commanded to take the entire land of Canaan for themselves and not leave any of the other people. God wanted his people living with him, growing strong in him and being a wonderful light to the nations around them, displaying the power and glory of God. But Israel did not complete the conquest. This is the problem. Israel became contented with what she already had. A little bit of God was enough, she must have thought. Instead of following God's agenda for her in the Promised Land, she followed her own human desires.

In fact, we'll see in the weeks ahead that Samson is a great example of someone who finds it really hard to live for the Lord alone. He's always making bad choices, even as God's servant because he fails to see the spiritual battle within himself. His heart is not fully devoted to the Lord and it gets him in trouble repeatedly.

It's easy for us to say, "Ah, this is good enough." But before you know it, the words of Judges come back to describe us, "*Again...you and I did evil in the eyes of the Lord.*" We slip into complacency and take our life with God lightly. Yet the Bible is clear that as God's people our desire must be to trust him fully. Our heart must be eager to fulfil his calling for us. We're not in the Promised Land but we live as citizens of God's kingdom wherever we are—whether at home, work, school, play or anywhere else. And our calling is to be light for the nations to see God's power and glory working in and through us. As people watch us, they should see what a difference a relationship with our covenant God makes.

The Persistence of our Covenant God

Secondly, consider the Persistence of our Covenant God

When we decide that God's way is not important and that we don't have to do everything he says, then, before we know it, God is out of the picture. Actually, the better way to say it is that we don't look for or care about God anymore. He's never out of the picture, is he? He wasn't out of the picture at the time of the Judges either.

The spiritual state of God's people back then was very poor. But that doesn't change God! Faithful to his covenant, the Lord sovereignly disciplines the children he loves. His people have forsaken the Lord. They do whatever pleases themselves. They

do evil in the eyes of the Lord. So the Lord sends an enemy to attack and conquer his people in order to awaken them. After reporting on the evil being done by Israel, v. 1 concludes,

Jdg 13:1 "...so the LORD delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years."

During those years his people cry out to him and God is **already preparing** to send a judge or a deliverer to rescue them.

The amazing thing is that God doesn't give up on his people. This is what I love about baptism. It's a sign of God's promise to be faithful to us, not of our faithfulness. God is faithful. He's raising up a deliverer to be the answer to prayer when his people finally see the error of their ways and cry out to him for help. God has the long picture in mind. He does not give up on us or give up on his mission. When his people fail to be a light in the world, God ensures that his own people as well as the nations around them will still have the opportunity to see that he is the one true God. And he goes to work. Just watch!

While much of Israel is doing evil in the eyes of the Lord, in a little village of Zorah, God puts together the pieces of the puzzle he will complete to bring about a miracle of his grace. A new deliverer will be born to help all people see the power of the God of Israel.

Just to make it abundantly clear that it's God's doing, he often chooses leaders from the most unlikely places. In this case, the Lord God comes to a couple from the tribe of Dan. And according to Numbers 26:42, the tribe of Dan was made up of only one clan, making it the least of the tribes of Israel. The smallest and least significant. In addition, we learn that Manoah and his wife were childless. This doesn't necessarily mean they were old, like Abraham and Sarah. It does mean, however, that their situation had existed long enough for people to consider it hopeless. Some of you know just how they felt. Year after year, they couldn't get pregnant. It would take a miracle.

So, God chooses a judge from the tiny tribe of Dan, and one to be born to a barren couple in Zorah. Interestingly, Zorah, the hometown of Samson was located only 3 km from the Philistine border. This judge will be like a next door neighbour to the Philistines. So, in these details, can you see what God is up to? He works his sovereign plan through the most unlikely of people—a tiny tribe and a barren home, right under the nose of the Philistines. In this way he shows us that we are powerless in ourselves to change our situation, just as Manoah and his wife were powerless to change their situation and as Israel seemed too small to combat the mighty Philistines. Clearly, then, any relief the people receive has to be a gift from the Lord Almighty. It must be an act of his grace!

Isn't that just like our covenant God? He raises up a judge like Samson from a marginalized tribe to show that he alone is able to act through the seemingly most insignificant instruments in the most difficult circumstances to defeat even the greatest of Israel's enemies, the Philistines.

So, when you look at your life, no matter how difficult the circumstances and how hopeless it all appears, we know that the persistent love of our covenant God for his

people causes him to work all the details together for our good—yes, even for our salvation—and for his glory in the world.

The Challenge for the Covenant People

That brings us to our final consideration today: The challenge for the covenant people.

When the angel of the Lord appeared to Manoah's wife, he let her know that she would receive a son and that this child was to be set apart for the Lord from birth. Samson would be a Nazarite. His special diet and long hair would be a visible sign of God's calling and claim on his life. He is appointed by God to begin the deliverance from the Philistines.

If you think back to the book of Joshua, you'll remember that teaching battle to the people of God meant mostly that they had to learn to let God be God—the one who fights for his people. Girls and boys, if you've listened to that one Veggie Tales songs that illustrates the Battle of Jericho, then you remember at one point the people of Jericho look down at the Israelites marching around and they sing, "Keep walking cause you won't knock down our wall. Keep walking, cause it isn't going to fall. It's plain to see that your brains are very small. So, keep walking; you won't be knocking down our wall." But the wall came down because the Lord knocked it down. And all his people did was trust him and obey him. This is what God was teaching his people in the desert for 40 years and in the Promised Land. They had to learn to listen, to trust him—even if it didn't make any sense to them—and obey.

Now Israel, at the time of Judges, faces the threat of the Philistine war machine. The Philistines have a well-disciplined army. And they have superior military equipment, like chariots and iron weapons, which are far better than the bronze weapons of Israel. Therefore, Israel—clearly the underdog from a human point of view—must learn to trust God and let him fight her battles. And in the case of Samson, God would show them in amazing ways that one man filled with his Spirit can single-handedly defeat even the mighty Philistines.

God gives us the story of Samson to help Israel and the church see that the greatest threat to the success of God's mission in the world comes from within our own ranks. We might look at the Philistines, but God only brought them forward because his own people were again doing evil in the sight of the Lord. So God's word challenges us to ask ourselves, "Do I trust God completely in the face of the enemy?" But before that, "Do I even recognize the less obvious enemies or have I already fallen prey to the subtle influence of evil all around me?" The birth of Samson challenges God's people to look at ourselves in relation to the Lord Jesus and trust him and his grace with our lives, rather than going our own way again and again. God is trustworthy and therefore worth following. He won't lead us astray. He has good in store, regardless of the enemies we need to deal with as we follow him.

Now, as you consider the challenge of living for the Lord today, remember some of these important things about God's presence and his power for us.

#1. Remember that Samson was conceived and given birth by a special act of God. He is a miracle. And out of a far greater act of God—the miracle of the incarnation—Jesus was born into this world to take on our sin, grief, our pain and our guilt.

#2. Remember that out of a barren couple God brought a miracle of grace. He gave a barren couple a son who would deliver his people from the Philistines. And the NT teaches us that while we were yet sinners—spiritually barren—God worked the ultimate miracle of grace. He brought forth his Son, born of a virgin, to deliver his people, not merely from the Philistines but from Satan and his armies.

The last phrase of v.5 says of Samson, “*and he will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines.*” What Samson begins, King David will complete with respect to the Philistines and the Promised Land. But David’s greater Son, Jesus, completes the battle for us. As Samson would fight single-handedly to bring deliverance for Israel, how much more Jesus! He came and single-handedly delivered us not from the greatest enemy on earth, but from the greatest enemy of earth and heaven, even sin, Satan and hell. He came to dwell among us and he continues to help us in the face of opposition, temptation and hardships. His grace is available and sufficient for us.

#3. Remember Samson was consecrated specially as a Nazarite from birth—set aside for the service of God in restoring the light of God in Israel for the world. So Jesus was consecrated to the service of God as the Light of the world who gives light to everyone who looks to him in faith. Because of Christ, the light of the gospel still shines brightly today. He is still alive and calling people like you and me from sin into faithfulness with him. He is still setting his people aside for the sake of his glory and his mission in this world. He marks us with baptism as his own, children of the covenant, people called to be reflecting the light of Christ in our world. Like William, we too are consecrated to him and his purposes. And he is empowering us with the Holy Spirit to do what he commands.

You see, congregation, our covenant God calls his covenant people—young and old—to respond to his grace in Christ his Son. The book of Judges reveals how easily we can slip into doing evil in the eyes of the Lord again and again. But our life finds its true purpose and joy in being consecrated to the Lord, like a Nazarite. That’s what baptism signifies. We are touched by and filled with grace. Therefore let us live in his power, the power of the Holy Spirit, not by the desires of the sinful nature or the peoples around us. We must hear the challenge to have Christ at the centre of our lives. We must teach in word and deed to our children that Christ is all we need and he will faithfully help us through every situation we may ever find ourselves in, whether it is temptation from within or without.

May it be said of us from generation to generation, “Again the people in the Trinity CRC did what was right in the eyes of the Lord.” We must pray that the light of God’s grace in Christ shines brightly through us to the world to bring greater and greater glory to the Lord.

Amen.