

DATES

9th Feb:

Judges 13 v 1
'Here we go again'

23rd Feb:

Judges 13 v 2-25
'A saviour is born'

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Judges 14
'A bundle of contradictions'

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Judges 15
'Vengeance'

13th April:

Judges 16
'From defeat to victory'

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Social night in groups

11th May:

Church social



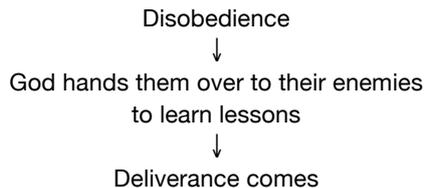
Samson...
The last of the Judges

Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord...

Most cities have famous landmarks and Belfast is no different. Since 1974 the two cranes you see on the front cover of your books have become iconic symbols in the city's shipyard and even to this day they dominate the skyline. The one in the background is called Goliath and the other to the fore is our character for these next 5 weeks – Samson...the inference being that, as with Goliath, his greatest imprint on this world was his strength and size. That, unfortunately, is Samson's legacy – a man with muscles and very little else. However, in these forthcoming weeks we want to delve deeper and uncover so much more about this man who was raised up, by God, for a very special purpose.

To open the book of Judges at chapter 13, is to discover a nation that was continually lurching back and forth between faithfulness and unfaithfulness. Indeed, this is the general tone of the book from the start all the way through to the end. As God had promised the

Israelites had inherited the land from their enemies and so rest and peace were being enjoyed after many years of travelling and conflict. And yet it was during this very time, when so much had been achieved, that their allegiance to God wavered and their spiritual temperature plunged. By the time chapter 13 is upon us there is a cycle in place that is replicated again and again:



...and round and round it goes.

If you look at chapter 13 verse 1 (we'll read the whole chapter in a moment) the first word exposes what is going on and how besetting this sin of abandoning God had become – 'AGAIN, we are told, the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord.' That is, it wasn't for the first time. What is therefore obvious is that the periods of hardship already experienced had not

brought about the faithfulness that God desired.

And it is within this context that God brings to pass the ultimate nightmare and the worst of scenarios that would surely deal with their rebellion – a full forty years of oppression under the hands of their arch enemies, and the mighty warriors of that time – the Philistines.

And so we are introduced to Samson, the man who would be God's man for this time in the world. As the years had passed God's people had just got used to their lot. It seems they had lost their identity as God's family, as well as their vision, and their calling to be distinct and unique from those around them. They were now a people who had succumbed to external pressure and had accepted the status quo under the hands of their enemies. And yet at the height their shame; at a time when none of them were calling for any kind of deliverance, the God who loved them, in spite of their stubbornness and stupidity, was about to come to their rescue once again.

Study 1: 9th Feb – ‘Here we go again’

Judges 13 v 1

Before we get into the heart of the story in the upcoming weeks it will be time well spent if we can get to grips with the spiritual condition of the Israelites during this period in history. All of us have ‘highs’ and ‘lows’ along our journey with God and often it may well feel like little progress is being made, and it is exactly this kind of experience that defines God’s people at this time...

“**Again** the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord...” v1.

With monotonous regularity we have read this phrase in the book of Judges (see 3v7; 3v12; 4v1,2; 6v1; 10v6,7), and here it appears once more.

1. It is so easy to look at these people and ask what on earth they are doing. For instance, why, after having been blessed beyond belief, would they get lazy and grow cold and sell themselves short by sullyng their lives with the habits of those around them? These are the thoughts that tend to enter into our minds. However, in our more honest moments, isn’t it true that we are exactly the same? Try to flesh this out as a group as you discuss these questions. Why are we so easily led astray? How do we get to the point where God loses His appeal? And what are some of the pitfalls / consequences that follow?

2. Having thought over these things, take some time to think about the next statement that comes in verse 1...’so the Lord

delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for 40 years.’ Bearing in mind that God is for us (Rom 8), and that what He begins in our lives He will see through to its end (Phil 1v6) why, then, would a loving God deliver His people into the hands of their enemies for 40 years? What is really going on here? (see also Daniel 1 v 1,2 and remember Jonah’s ‘pleasant’ sailing trip after he fled).

3. Why is it that so much growth can often come to our lives when God leads us through intensely tough times? Do we grow as much when all is well? If not, why not? Are there any examples from within your group of how God has used enormous pain to bring to pass incredible blessing?

4. It is clear from the silence of the text that God came to these people to save them when they hadn’t even asked. We know that they had asked for deliverance in the past, but that is not so on this occasion. Can we think of any other famous examples from Scripture where God takes the initiative to save those who had wandered?

5. In conclusion, and as an extension to Qu. 4, what are we learning here about God and the way He brings His people to Himself (see ch13v5; Romans 5v6; Eph 2v1)? Why is this such good news...

- for us,
- and for those who are still far away from faith?

Study 2: 23rd Feb – ‘Samson, a saviour is born’

Judges 13 v 2-25

Our title for tonight would not be a fitting close to the second verse of our favourite carol. When we sing ‘Silent Night’, we celebrate the birth of one far greater than Samson; the true and risen Saviour, Jesus. Nevertheless, that fact should not cause us to take Samson lightly (as if we could!). For as we will see this evening, he too, in his day, was a saviour. At his birth a saviour was born (see verse 5).

1. Most Biblical births get, at most, a couple of lines. That is not the case in our story. Out of the 4 chapters in our Bibles that give the life details of this not so gentle giant, the whole of chapter 13 is given over to his nativity. It is therefore intended that as we come to this chapter, we should see an indication of the importance of this man. Once you have read through chapter 13 in your group, discuss what other reasons we are given that would have us believe that this man was destined for something special.

2. Samson was born to two unknowns in Bible terms – Manoah and a woman whose name is not even given. All we know is she was barren (just like Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel before her and Hannah and Elizabeth after her). Why is it that, again and again in our Bibles, God seems to use impossible situations to accomplish His plan?

3. Maybe you could take a little time as a group to think of some instances in your lives / or from Scripture where God has used weakness, inability and even apparent impossibility

to bring to pass His will. Why should this fill us as a church with Biblical optimism?

4. It seems from verse 8 that raising children was just as tough then as it is now. Here was a man who was so devoted to his child he asked for divine instructions for the task. That is – on his own he knew it was beyond him. What are the areas of our lives that seem beyond us? Where do we (and where should we) turn for guidance?

5. The heart of this chapter is found in verses 8 and 9:

V8 – Then Manoah prayed...

V9 – God heard Manoah.

We can’t even begin to understand how Manoah must have felt and what questions he surely asked when his barren wife announced she was having a son – and so he prayed to a listening God. As you consider how our prayers on earth are heard in heaven think through the following questions and answer them as honestly as you can.

- Are you / we as a church making the most of this gift?
- If not, why not?
- How can we develop a greater culture of prayer privately as well as corporately?

Study 3: 9th March – ‘A bundle of contradictions’

Judges 14

How we start off in life is often not how we continue or even end. Sadly, and especially so for our children, there are no guarantees. Many great parents have been as faithful as Manoaah and his wife, have sought the Lord to lead them every step of the way, and yet, like them they have had to watch as a child grows into adulthood only to disobey and displease God. The end of chapter 13 finished with the blessing of the Lord resting on Samson and the Spirit of the Lord stirring him that he might serve – but as chapter 14 arrives (read it together) the frailties of this leader emerge.

1. The scene recorded at the start of chapter 14 must have broken the hearts of Samson’s parents – ‘I have found a Philistine woman in Timnah; now get her for me as my wife.’ He is even more emphatic in verse 3 – ‘get HER (emphasis in the Hebrew) for me.’ Here we find a young man who knows what he wants. The issue to be discussed here is found in verse 4...Samson is sinning but what is God doing behind the scenes? Think through the implications that this verse has for our lives, even when we are following our own sinful desires.

2. The contents of verses 5 and 6 take us all the way back to our Sunday School days. If we read ahead in ch14v19 and ch15v14 we quickly discover that this incident is merely a preview to the main action that is about to come. Turn to 1 Samuel 17 v 34-37 and tease out as a group what God is doing in Samson at this time.

3. What has God done for you or shown to you in the past that has prepared you for the tasks He now has for you?

4. It is in verses 10-18 that the contradictions in this young man begin to emerge and it is a foretaste of what is to come. The wedding banquet is in full swing and it is at this time in the text that the man who is physically strong reveals his achilles heel. The one who looks the part is weak inside. The one who has the Spirit’s power is susceptible to attack. What are the obvious lessons to be learned here? Is Samson alone in being a man of contradictions?

5. As a follow on to Qu.4 think, on a practical level, how weaknesses in our lives can be best addressed so that we can remain usable to God for many years to come? Who or what do we need?

6. The deliverance that God planned for the Israelites begins slowly; Samson killing only 30 of the enemy (see v19,20) with many remaining; The winds of change seem to be a long time in coming. What could God possibly achieve by taking His time? Can you think of situations where God has taken His time to deliver you or to answer your cry for help? Maybe you are in such a situation just now. Waiting is not something that comes naturally, especially as life seems to be getting faster! And yet there are times that God, it appears, moves slowly. How might we be changed as we wait for Him to deliver us? How should we spend our time as we wait?

As you end your study for this evening give thanks to God for the deliverances (small and big / slow and fast) that He has brought to pass in your life. And take time to pray for those who are still waiting on God to come.

Study 4: 23rd March – ‘Vengeance’

Judges 15

Welcome back for our 4th study in the life of Samson. If you were at your group last time around then you will know that Samson’s wedding reception wasn’t quite the one that most parents have in mind for their son. The chapter ends with 30 men losing their clothes and their lives and Samson losing his wife to a guest on the big day. It is this issue – the breakdown in his marriage – that provides the backdrop to the events we come to tonight. We see this in verse 1 as Samson takes a young goat (ancient code for a bunch of flowers and a box of chocolates) to his wife as he seeks to heal the wounds. Read the chapter together so you can see the bigger picture.

1. There is a very large dose of retaliation on display in verses 1-8. A Philistine has taken Samson’s wife so he, in turn, burns their crops. The Philistines burn Samson’s wife and father in law to death, no doubt blaming them for their burnt fields so he, in turn, attacks them in verse 8, slaughtering many of them.

The scene is a far cry from Luke 6 where Jesus teaches us to love our enemies! In your groups think through the rights and wrongs of Samson’s actions here, and as you do so, discuss whether there are certain enemies in your own life where a similar ruthlessness would be appropriate.

2. In the warfare that we are engaged in we obviously don’t use foxes or jawbones but there are many spiritual weapons that are at our disposal. What are these ‘weapons’ and how can each one repel the enemy?

3. Being critical of others, as we sit on the sidelines doing nothing for God, is sadly a sin that all of us have fallen into at one time or another (see v9-11). Verse 11 records the moment when the men from Judah (who had been sitting on their hands) confronted Samson to express their concern at his strategy (at least he had one!). However, it is what they say in verse 11 that reveals an even bigger spiritual problem in their hearts. What is it?

Look also at ch.1 vs.1-2, 8 &17-18 to get a real grasp of how much they had changed.

4. When we lose our vision and just accept the status quo; as the Israelites had done; what are we really saying about:

- a. God, and
- b. Our circumstances?

5. Samson surrendering to these men is a strange development and perhaps can only be explained by his desire to protect them (i.e. if they didn’t deliver Samson then the Philistines would surely punish them). However, his actions open up another opportunity to take the fight to God’s enemy. Read verse 14, and 18 to be reminded of where all spiritual success comes.

Can you think of 3 things we can learn from this and apply to all our strategies / ministries?

Study 5: 13th April – ‘From defeat to victory’

Judges 16

How would you like to be remembered? As a man or woman of integrity? As someone who puts others first? As a loving parent, husband or wife? Whatever your answer, none of us, I'm sure, would want to be remembered for the most shameful moments of our lives. That would be something that would make us all cringe – and yet, sadly, this is how we remember Samson. He is the man who put his love for Deliah above his love for God and in doing so brought about his own demise. As you begin tonight, discuss within your group whether this is a fair reflection of Israel's last judge, taking into account all that he did in his solitary fight against God's enemies. You also might want to check out how the Bible remembers Samson in Hebrews 11.

1. The opening 22 verses of chapter 16 record the tragic consequences of a life not lived exclusively for God. It all starts with a prostitute in v1, before Delilah appears in v4 and soon the light of this man is gradually snuffed out. It is not long before we read the awful words of v20 – ‘he did not know that the Lord had left him’. What does it mean for God to leave one of his servants? What are the serious warnings we see here and how can we learn from Samson's mistake?

2. Discuss whether it is fair to say that Samson's life is a paradigm of the nation of Israel as a whole, in terms of their respective spiritual journey's with God? Do we see ourselves reflected in him as well?

3. One of the dangers of chapter 16 is that we become so

engrossed in the details of the drama that we miss out on the teaching point that God has preserved for us here. Of course the drama is very interesting but there is something deeper to be discovered. Turn to verses 23-25, as the scene unfolds in Dagon's temple. What are the consequences of sinful behaviour? What happens when our sin is witnessed by others in the world.

4. The climax of the story which comes from verse 25 onwards reveals that Samson will not remain a hairless trophy for the Philistines. Here is God acting to vindicate His own name as He comes to the aid of His servant. Given the mention of a prostitute in v1, and Deliah's triumph over him in v17 (not to mention all that has gone before in ch13-16), why would Samson think his prayer in v28 would be heard? What is the teaching point here and how should this inspire us, and bring hope to us as we all stumble from one sin to the next?

5. Looking back over the life of this man we must mention the strangeness of God's choice. That is, why would God use a character like Samson as His servant? Here is a fellow who shatters all our moulds and expectations of what a servant of God should be. Not content to destroy God's enemies, he ends up destroying himself. And yet, here he is in our Bibles experiencing his greatest triumph AFTER his greatest failure. Think about other examples of this from your Bibles / or your own experience, and re-discover the amazing truth that God can, and will, do extraordinary things through people who make massive mistakes.