

“Here Comes the Judge!” - A Study on the Old Testament Book of Judges

Session 8 November 11, 2020

Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, Samson Judges 12:8-10, 12:11-12, 12:13-15, 13:1-16:31

Recap: The Judges’ Cycle

The Judges’ Cycle (found in Judges Chapter 2, verses 10 through 19) is as follows...

1. The tribes of Israel rebel against God, often worshipping the gods of the people of Canaan (Baal, Ashtoreth, etc.)
2. God is provoked to anger by the Israelites actions, and allows another group to rise and invade, plunder, or oppress the tribes of Israel.
3. The distress causes the tribes of Israel to cry out to the Lord, asking for repentance for their actions.
4. God sends rescue through a chosen leader, a “judge” to put down the oppressors, creating a time of peace for the tribes.
5. When the “judge” dies, the tribes once again turn away from God and rebel again.

Session 6 Recap

In Session 7, we looked at the minor judges, Tola and Jair, and the next major judge, Jephthah. Tola and Jair arrives on the coat tails of Abimilech, the “False” judge”, bringing peace to the tribes of Israel. Tola ushered in a 23-year period of peace and is the only minor judge who is said to have “saved” the tribes. Jair, who ushers in 22 years of peace, revealed a more personal approach to judgeship, controlling 30 cities in the Gilead territory, assisted by his 30 sons on 30 donkeys. Jephthah, a Gileadite warrior, emerged on the scene as judge following an 18-year oppression by the Philistines and Ammonites. The Israelites had turned to worshipping gods and idols found within the Promised Land border and outside the land’s divide. After questioning the sincerity of the tribe’s plea for help, God calls the illegitimate son from Gilead to rise and lead. Once shunned by the community, Jephthah is now embraced and attempts to use diplomatic persuasion, before having to turn to battle. What should have led to inner peace, a hasty vow by the judge leads to the “sacrifice” of his only daughter following the battle victory. Jephthah then leads a battle against a fellow Israelite tribe because of their jealousy, showing fractures taking place among the tribes. Jephthah ruled for only 8 years, the shortest of any judge thus far.

Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, & Samson Judges 12:8-10, 12:11-12, 12:13-15, 13:1-16:31

Following the short reign of Jephthah, three minor judges are mentioned before we look at the final major judge, Samson. Ibzan of Bethlehem used marriage of his sons and daughters to create a familial power base for seven years. Elon the Zebulunite follows leading the tribes for ten years. The final minor judge, Abdon, the son of Hillel, used his family as well to create a power base, with scripture emphasizing his desire for “kingship” with the mention of family members riding on donkeys. He ruled for eight years. Finally, the last major judge, Samson the “Nazirite”, judges Israel. Appointed as a “judge” before he was born, Samson’s womanizing, selfish nature shines through his “leadership”. His character flaws lead to his eventual death, but not before taking down the “accepted” oppression by the Philistines. His reign ends with chaos throughout the tribes of Israel, with the need and desire for a “king” beginning to emerge.

The Minor Judges

Ibzan

Judges 12:8-10

Ibzan is the minor judge that occurs immediately following Jephthah. Some biblical scholars believe that his reign coincides with part of Jephthah’s reign. Ibzan is from Bethlehem (probably closer to the northern border, near Asher). In the entire book of Judges, each judge is believed to represent a tribe (produce a judge). If this were the case, Ibzan would represent the tribe of Asher. Ibzan (whose name means “swift” in Hebrew) used his many sons and daughters to marry “outside” the tribe(s) to increase his political and powerful clout. He ruled for seven years and was buried in Bethlehem upon his death.

Elon

Judges 12:11-12

Even less is known about the next minor judge, Elon. Elon’s name means “oak” or “Terebinth” (a small tree from the cashew family that was commonly used as a source of turpentine). Elon was from the tribe of Zebulun and ruled for ten years. He was buried in Aijalon (only time this location is mentioned in the entire Bible) in the land of the Zebulunites. (The name “Elon” was mentioned as one of the three sons of Zebulun in Genesis 46:14 and Numbers 26:26. “Elon” was also the name as the father of one of the wives of Esau.)

Abdon

Judges 12:13-15

Abdon was the son of Hillel who was from the town of Pirathon in Ephraim (about 10 kilometers southwest of Shechem). The name “Abdon” often refers to the meaning “servant” or “servile” in Hebrew. His reign as judge lasted eight years. The mention of Abdon’s family, “40 sons and 30 grandsons”, may indicate two things – multiple wives of Abdon and a perceived “wealth” within that area. The area in which he lived is often referred to as the “Amalekite hill country”, which denotes lack of control of the area by the tribes of Israel. The mention of “donkeys” in description of his family might also indicate a desire or wish to be king (riding donkeys is a common image for a “king”).

The Last Major Judge

Samson

Judges 13:1-16:31

Unlike the other major judges described in the Old Testament book of Judges, Samson does not follow a clear path in the “Judges’ cycle”. There is mention of elements of the cycle found throughout the story, but his calling, leadership style, and interactions with the Philistines does not adhere to a specific structure. Instead of following “the cycle” for the “last judge”, we will look at his story from major milestones.

Oppression, The “Call” before Birth, and Samson’s Birth

Judges 13:1-25

The story of Samson begins with the similar refrain as with past judges, “the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord”. With this insurrection, the tribes of Israel are given into the hands of the Philistines for forty years! The Philistines lived on the west side of Canaan, along the Mediterranean seashore. The Philistines were the major threat to Israel beginning in the time of the judges to the reign of King David. The Philistines were known as fierce warriors, having the ability to fashion weapons out of iron, a dominant force during that time. In this story, their rule over the Israelites lasted forty years – and the Israelites still did not cry out (lost amid their sin)!

Unlike the previous judges, God preordains a judge before he is even born. Zorah, a Danite (tribe of Dan), and his wife are barren without a child to be their heir. In that time, a “childless” couple often brought ridicule or rumor (that they lived a sinful life). God sends an angel to appear to the woman to tell her that she will give birth to a son, a son that she will raise as a Nazirite. This son will free the

people from the Philistines (similar to Isaac with Sarah; Samuel with Hannah; John the Baptist with Elizabeth; even Jesus with Mary – all, except for Hannah, was promised by an angel from God).

The Nazirite (“separated one”) vow is found in Numbers chapter 6. The vow had three basic stipulations: not to cut your hair during the period of the vow, not to drink any products from the vine (wine, grape juice), and not to have contact with any dead animals. The usual intent of the vow was to ask God for special help during a specific period, placing sole focus on Him. The growing hair and avoiding “the vine” were signs to others of striving towards a goal. Avoiding a dead body was to remain “ceremonially clean”, as priests often did. The Nazirite vow was usually made voluntarily and set for a specific period. In this case, Samson’s parents were “accepting the vow” for him, a vow to accept for his entire life. Even Samson’s mother had to start observing the rules, since Samson would be in her womb! Samson was to be set apart for his judgeship role.

The mother went immediately to tell her husband, Manoah. She retold the message from the angelic figure to her husband, sharing that she did not “ask where he came from or his name”. She accepted the message with complete faith! Upon hearing the news, Manoah prays to God to resend the messenger so they will be able to raise their son appropriately. Some biblical scholars see this as a lack of faith (“I need to see it and hear it with my own eyes and ears!”), while most see this as an act of a faithful father. The angelic being reappears to the woman (with Manoah not around), and she immediately runs to get him. Upon asking if this figure is the same as before, he answers “I am” (“I am who I am” – God!).

After repeating the rules as given before, Manoah offers to feed the heavenly guest. A common practice within pagan cultures was to offer food to a “divine” being, believing that if they ate, the being would be “in debt” to the provider (in another circumstance, angels do eat with humans – Genesis 18:18). Also, there was a common belief in biblical times that if you knew the name of a “divine” being, a relationship – even control - was established with duties for both sides. The angel was also saying his name was beyond understanding – mysterious to the human mind. The angelic figure refuses both, and states if you want to honor God, prepare a grain and burnt offering instead (a grain offering was often a loaf of bread beside the larger burnt offering, a sign of honor and respect to God – recalling the bread he provided to the fleeing Israelites). After

the offering is prepared and burned, the angelic figure ascends in the flame up to heaven. The ultimate desire of Manoah, to know this was a messenger from God, was confirmed.

Manoah and his wife fall to their knees with faces to the ground, fearing they will die because they have seen “God”. History has shown that those who see God, often perish. Using logic, Manoah’s wife states that if God desired to kill them, He would have done it before the request for offerings (or before the promise that they will bear a son)! The couple is blessed with a son, naming him Samson. Samson literally means, “little sun”, a nod to the often-worshipped sun god of the Canaanites (indicating the overwhelming influence of the Canaanite gods on the people of Israel – even a son proclaimed by God)! The child grows and is blessed by the Lord. Samson is a part of the tribe of Dan (who was known for their wandering nature, still “wandering” in their promised land in Joshua 18 and 19). This connection to the tribe of Dan models the wandering nature of Samson as he grows.

Samson’s Marriage and Effects

Judges 14:1 - 15:20

As Samson grows into a man, his womanizing nature and cockiness take center stage. Probably of all the judges, Samson is the most flawed character of the lot. Samson travels to Timnah and sees a young Philistine woman who catches his eye. He returns home to his parents, asking them to get her as his wife. His parents initially refused, encouraging him to find a wife among the Israelite tribes. Samson refuses, allowing his lust to dictate the day.

Samson’s parents knew the call that was placed on Samson’s life, to free his people from the Philistines. How could they forget it! They try to steer Samson in a different direction for a bride, a “circumcised” bride. The parent’s issue was not a racial one, but instead a covenant issue. A non-Israelite bride would not have the same relationship or bond as an Israelite bride would have, leading to possible conflict. (Samson’s desire models the decreasing faith connection of Israel – right in “my eyes”.)

Samson is dominated by his senses – sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch. He is impulsive, leading to future lack of sexual control. He is unteachable, allowing his pride to take control rather than words from his advocates. Both these characteristics can be closely identified with Israel.

One important note, Samson was able to travel freely into Timnah, a Philistine area within the territory of the Israelites, without any difficulty. The Philistines were settled, living normal lives within the Promised Land – as rulers. The Israelites (modeled by Samson’s behavior) did not think anything about it. Their “occupation” of the area seemed peaceful, a basic part of life. (Notice, the Israelites have not “cried” out to God still – they just accepted the occupation. They were oblivious to their enslavement – both physically and spiritually.)

Yet, God was working – using this desired relationship to create a wedge between Samson and the Philistines. As Samson travels back to Timnah (the location of many vineyards, most likely violating his vow to avoid the grape – wine or otherwise) to gain his bride, a young lion attacks him. “The Spirit of the Lord came upon” Samson and he tore the lion to pieces. (Remember, this would violate his Nazirite vow to not touch a dead animal. He should go straight to the tabernacle for cleaning.) His lust, instead, dominates him and he continues to Timnah. When he returned later to finally take her as his bride, the carcass from the animal was filled with bees with honey inside. Samson takes the honey in his hand, consumes some of it, and returns the rest home so his parents might enjoy it. (Remember, this would have made them ceremonially unclean too!) At this point, Samson has most likely violated two of the Nazirite vows, with his long hair being the only one left.

Samson prepares to wed his Philistine bride. He prepared a feast, and some of her Philistine companions attend the events. Samson’s cockiness begins to show. He gambles with the gathered Philistines to answer a riddle. If they can answer before the seven-day wedding period is over, then he will give them “thirty linen wraps and thirty changes of clothes”. If they are unable to answer, they must provide the same to Samson. The riddle, a play on words, depicts the scene of the dead lion and the honey. No one, except for Samson, knew this story, so their chance at answering correctly would be impossible. (An interesting side note, “love” could also be the answer to the riddle!) Three days pass without any possible answer. On the fourth day, the companions put pressure – even threaten – Samson’s wife and her father. She begged and pleaded with Samson for the answer to the riddle, and finally on the seventh day he gave in. The companions share the answer to the riddle – honey and lion – on the last day of the bet, earning the stated prize. Samson gave into his sensual nature, sharing the answer, and it backfired. He should have learned from this!

Samson is enraged. He states, “if you had not plowed with my heifer”, you would not have the answer. This literally means “if you had not manipulated my wife”. Enraged, Samson goes away to pay the debt. “The Spirit of the Lord came upon him”, and he killed thirty Ashkelon men to pay the stated debt. This was not about Israel; it was about saving face for Samson! The lasting sting, however, is that while Samson is gone, his “wife” is married off to his “best man”, a Philistine companion.

Revenge ensues. Samson’s lack of control rages full force. Samson attempts to visit his wife (Some biblical scholars indicate that he did not know she had been married to another man. I think this is a stretch...) Her father refuses him, offering her younger sister as a bride instead. Samson refuses, and instead decides to get even – hopefully anonymously. He captures three hundred foxes (what a feat!), ties a torch between two of their tails, and released them into the grain fields, vineyards, and olive groves of the Philistines. The Philistines discover the culprit, and up his revenge by burning his “wife” and her father to death. Samson retaliates, but promises to cease the fight afterwards. He kills those guilty of the crude act to his wife and her father, and then settles in Etam afterwards.

The Philistines, however, are not done. They amass an army and camp in Judah, in hopes of binding Samson and putting him to death. The Judahites, fearing retribution from the Philistines, travel with 3,000 men to Samson to question his motives. (Even Judah, one of the strongest of the tribes in the beginning, cower to the rule of the Philistines. They turn against the God-appointed judge to keep peace with the “world”.) Samson allows the men from Judah to bind him with two ropes, as long as they do not kill him. As he is returned to the Philistines, they cheer his capture. However, “the Spirit of the Lord came upon” Samson, and his binding fall apart to the wayside. He found a jawbone (another dead animal part!) nearby and killed a thousand Philistines with the crude weapon (like the actions of the judge, Shamgar, with an oxgoad). Samson taunts them as he does this act. Samson names the place “Ramath-lehi”, which means “The Hill of the Jawbone.”

Samson then does something that he has yet to do in his life – turn to God for help! This is one of only two occurrences he does so, the latter being towards his death. Although “the Spirit” keeps descending on Samson, we are not sure if he truly understands that God has been “working through him” this entire time.

Desiring water after the battle, Samson turns to God for help. “He cries out to the Lord”, an action that the Israelites should have taken! God provides water from a rock, one that Samson names En-hakkore, “The Spring of the One who called”. (This event models the Lord providing water to the Israelites as they exodus from Egypt in Exodus 17.) This solidifies the continuing thread of Samson serving as a metaphor for Israel.

Samson then judged Israel for twenty years, even though the Philistines were still in control.

Samson’s Weakness Revealed

Judges 16:1 – 31

Samson’s womanizing nature controls him again! Samson travels to Gaza, the capital of the Philistine territory, and sleeps with a harlot. While giving into his lustful desires, the Philistines in Gaza discover his presence and surround his location. They plan to overwhelm Samson in the morning. Samson awakes at midnight, escapes and pull the city gates up, and carries them to an adjacent Israelite mountain in Hebron. He places the gates at the top of the mountain, as a sign of mockery to the Philistines.

Samson is seized by his sensual nature, this time by the woman Delilah. Biblical scholars debate whether she was Israelite, Canaanite, or Philistine. Her location, the valley of Sorek, lies in Israelite territory, near Jerusalem. Delilah means “flirtatious” and speaks to her nature. The name is closely linked to the word, “night”, reiterating the previous sexual exploitation, where “night” is mentioned four times.

The leaders of the Philistines (five major cities for the Philistines – Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, Gath, and Gaza – were centers of trade and commerce for the people; scholars believe these five rulers, with wealth abound, approach Delilah) seek Delilah for an answer to Samson’s strength, with wealth to follow. Delilah is probably motivated by greed and fame – she would be a national hero for the Philistines if she could deliver Samson. Three times Delilah attempt to coax the secret to his strength and how he could be bound. (One would think Samson would get the hint, especially after the first and second failure!) The first time, Samson said seven fresh cords. After being bound by Delilah, he snaps them like “a string of tow snaps when it touches fire”. The second time, Samson tells her that if he is tied with new ropes that have never been used, he will become weak. After being bound and “warned” that the Philistines were present, he “snapped

the ropes off his arms like a thread.” The third time, Samson hints at his secret with having her weave the locks of his hair with a web and secured by a pin. Again, Samson awakens and pulls out the pin in the loom and the web.

Why did Samson keep giving in to Delilah? Driven by lust or simply overconfident and playing a dangerous game, Samson keeps returning to his sensual nature. Frustrated by his lack of honesty, Delilah tugs on his “love” for her. After pressing for days, and “his soul was annoyed to death”, he finally tells the truth. Samson reveals the last of the three vows that he “followed” since birth, his hair never being cut. Samson either wanted to believe Delilah’s “lies” of love, or he believed that “his” strength was from him, not God. Delilah summoned the Philistine leaders, who paid the sum of ransom, and she waited for him to sleep.

As Samson fell asleep in her lap (ironic, Israel had fallen asleep in the laps of the Canaanite gods/idols), Delilah summoned a man to shave his head. The strength left Samson. When he awoke as before, Samson expected to do the same with “his” strength. This time, it was gone. The Philistines grabbed him, gouged his eyes out, and bound him with bronze chains in Gaza, making him a grinder in prison. (A grinder at a mill is typically done by women or slaves, an act of humiliation towards Samson.) A shaved head is the typical symbol of a person in exile. However, the hair begins to grow.

Many question why God allowed Samson to be taken, unlike judges from the past. This departure reflects Samson’s dependence on himself, rather than his faith and trust in God. Why did the Philistines allow his hair to grow back? Surely, they saw this act. However, the source of Samson’s strength was not in his hair (or the other two vows of a Nazirite), it was in God! Hair or no hair, when Samson turned to God, his source of strength was present! The Philistines allowed his hair to grow back because they knew Samson’s “vows” to God were broken. But we are talking about God! The Philistines knew “conditional” gods. Samson knew the “unconditional” God!

The Philistines are overjoyed with the capture of Samson. They assemble to have a great sacrifice in the temple of the god Dagon. (Dagon was the chief god of the Philistines, the god of grain and harvest. The temple was a place of entertainment and sacrifice, often human sacrifice.) The temple was full of Philistines, with 3,000 additional men and women sitting on the roof of the temple. The Philistines call for Samson to “entertain” them, a form of mockery.

The true battle is not Samson vs the Philistines, but the one true God versus the false gods, in this case Dagon. While in the temple, Samson asks the boy holding his hand (remember, Samson is blind) to prop him up between the pillars holding up the temple. For only the second time in his life, Samson turns to God for help. "Remember me." "Give me strength one last time." This may be the only time he turned to God with true faith, and God delivered! Braced between the two middle pillars, one hand on each, he calls out to God, "Let me die with the Philistines!" The temple came crashing down, killing more in this single act than he had in the rest of his life.

Samson had a newfound humility, recognizing that God was in control. Some biblical scholars argue that this final act of Samson was vengeful (Samson speaks these words himself...), rather than faithful. However, Samson recognizes that God is sovereign. Samson recognizes his one true God is relational, covenantal, and saving – not just for him, but his people Israel. Hebrews 11 records that Samson was a man of faith, "made strong out of his weakness". Through Samson, God sees deliverance for His people – temporarily and in events to come.

Samson's body is taken by his brothers and his father's household back to the tomb of his father, Manoah, where he was laid to rest. The last thing we are told is that Samson judged for twenty years. But there is no peace...

Questions to Reflect On...

Similar to Samson, where in your life do you need to rely on God's grace and deliverance, rather than your own strength? How would doing this change your actions and increase your joy?

How are you feeling weak today? It is God's strength that matters. How does having that knowledge enable you to have peace and purity in your weakness?

Next Week...

“Here Comes the Judge” – Session 9

Wednesday, November 18 6:30 PM

Focus – The Aftermath

Judges 17 – 21

New Study during the Season of Advent...

***“Incarnation”* by Adam Hamilton**

A Four Week Study on the titles/names used in the New Testament stories given to Jesus at birth, and how they reveal the deep truths about who He is and what His coming means.

Begins Wednesday, December 2 @ 6:30 PM on Facebook Live

*****Copies of the book can be ordered on Amazon or Cokesbury. Highly recommended for this study!*****