

### The Book of Judges

#### Lesson 21 - Chapter 14

Our discussion last week centered on the meteoric and volatile Samson, from the Book of Judges chapter 13. We examined his God-announced miraculous birth (by a mysterious manifestation of God termed the Angel of the Lord) from the long-void womb of his aged mother and we discussed his status as a Nazirite that actually began while he was still in (and part of) his mother's body. He would retain that **Nazir** status all of his life, even if he didn't maintain all of its requirements.

Samson was of the tribe of Dan who's allotted territory was unfortunately located adjacent to the coastal region that was dominated by the powerful Philistines, also known as the Sea Peoples. Samson was part of only a small remnant of Danites who had elected to remain in central Canaan as the bulk of their tribe migrated well north to the Lebanon border area and there re-established themselves. The Philistines had proved too formidable for them to carry out God's instructions to drive them out of the piece of the Promised Land for which they were responsible; so now the descendants of Dan lived either up north or in small enclaves in some of the other Israelite tribal territories, Judah being one of the primary locations as it was nearest to them and among the larger territories.

Let me remind you that it was Samson's God-ordained purpose to begin to address the oppression (or better, strong influence) of the Philistines and they're pagan culture upon the local Israelites. Samson would not (and it was not his assignment) to deliver Israel from their enemy; only to begin the process by stirring up trouble between the Philistines and Israelites who had constructed a peaceful co-existence that was precisely against anything that the Lord wanted for His people.

Let me also remind you that this was but a continuation of the Holy War begun by Joshua. Samson's actions were in a sense God-sanctioned. While Shimshon's (Samson's) motives and methods were often questionable (if not downright criminal) the Lord influenced him and at certain critical moments anointed Samson with supernatural strength. Those critical moments often came after Samson went astray from Hebrew cultural norms and from the Law of Moses in such a way as to precipitate some crises or another; so Samson and his relationship with Yehoveh and the manner Yehoveh worked through Samson is quite unique among the Judges and not something (I think) we ought to seek for ourselves for the most part.

Let's read Judges 14 to start things off today.

**READ JUDGES CHAPTER 14 all**

Samson was around 18 to 19 years old when the Spirit of God came upon him for the first recorded time, back in Chapter 13. So he was about 20 as we enter chapter 14 and Samson spies a girl he'd like for a wife.

Verse 1 explains that he went "down" to **Timnah**. Samson's home was in **Tzorah**, in the foothills of Judah, an elevation of around 800 feet. Timnah was a mostly Philistine city at this time, and located in the area the Philistines preferred: on the coastal plain of Canaan sometimes called the Shefelah.

I've been taken to task occasionally for calling the area where the 12 tribes had now lived for at last 3 centuries as Canaan; but historically that is accurate. Israel was a named nation only in the sense that it consisted of a people group that stemmed from a common ancestor, Jacob; they were not a country. They were fairly well united during Joshua's day as they accepted a common leader and priesthood while Joshua lived but quickly after his death they reverted to a typical tribal society in which each tribe was its own entity, and the only other allegiance each tribe held was to whatever treaty-based relationships they formed. There was no sovereign nation of Israel with a central government, and it's that eventual formation of a central government that is the historical marker that ends the era of the Judges and begins the era of the Kings. The formation of the central government led by a king is also when Israel was finally called Israel. Bottom line: during the era of the **Shophetim** there were 12 Hebrew tribes plus the Levites who inhabited the Land of Canaan, but in no way was this place called Israel (yet).

Samson was in Timnah one day (for some unknown purpose but it may be because one of his friends told him about this beautiful unmarried girl) when a Philistine girl catches his eye; he fell instantly in lust with her. That Samson "saw a woman" means more than to notice her existence; it means he saw her unveiled face, meaning from typical Middle Eastern cultural norms this was an immodest girl. He went to his parents and asked them to get her for him. That may sound a bit strange, but what this is talking about is the usual custom of parents negotiating the marriage among each other.

Shimshon's parents were horrified; Samson was a Nazarite. He was set apart for God when he was still an embryo and a Nazarite was expected to be especially observant of the Torah. For him to want a Philistine girl (an immodest one at that) had to take their breath away; for one thing it was against Hebrew Law. Naturally his parents want to know why he can't pick a woman from among their own people and Samson's rash and disrespectful reply is: "get her, I want her". Most versions say that he said, "get her, she pleases me well". Actually what it literally says is, "get her, she is right in my sight". What a contrast and what a revealing of Samson's underlying character are contained in that abrupt answer. The contrast is that each time a new Judge cycle begins we have the Lord saying, "Israel was evil in my sight". Now here is Samson saying that in his sight this pagan girl is the right choice. Samson is declaring that his judgment is beyond reproach (almost like Yehoveh's) and if something is right in his sight (if it's good to his mind), then there is no point in discussing the matter further.

But we're given an important piece of information in verse 4 that Samson's parents shock came from their not knowing that, "this came from Adonai who was seeking grounds for a quarrel". Now there's a lot of disagreement over whether it was Samson or the Lord who is

the one who was seeking the means to start a fight. I don't think it matters all that much. After all we're told in no uncertain terms that the impulse in Samson to want this attractive heathen female as a wife came from Yehoveh; so either way Samson was just following through with what was divinely destined to be. God had arranged this connection and is going to use this situation to move against His enemy the Philistines.

This is a side of God that most Theologians and modern Christians would like to believe is gone. The side where justice has been replaced by love and mercy. The side where the sin of a Believer, no matter how egregious, brings no consequence with it. The side of God where obedience is a thing of the past and now all we have to do is "feel" love towards Him and one another. Here in Judges we have the Lord picking a fight with someone who is not looking for one, and using Samson as a surrogate. The Lord doesn't LIKE the peace and calm between His people and the Philistines. Why not? Because the Philistines don't belong there. They don't belong in Canaan. The Father gave direct instructions to Moses and Joshua to drive out or destroy all who oppose Him from Canaan but instead His people have decided they'd rather switch than fight. Now hear this because I've heard this instruction from God absolutely twisted in the mouths of lay people, pastors, and those who are antagonistic to the Church: the ONLY place this hawkish instruction applied to was Canaan because of all the places on earth this was His place. Israel was to defend itself against foreigners (those living outside of Canaan), but they were to try to make peace with them if at all possible. There was no worldwide crusade or genocide decreed. So, brethren, we have no reason to be cringing or apologizing for our God's decision in that era.

Samson's parents caved in to his demands and so the 3 of them journeyed to Timnah so marriage arrangements could be made. On the outskirts of that Philistine village was a vineyard, where he and his parents separated. Going through the vineyard was the most direct route to Timnah but since Shimshon was a Nazir he had to avoid contact with grapes; thus he took the long way around. Suddenly Samson stumbled upon a lion. The startled lion roared a threatening roar at him and Samson leaped into action. The Lord was going to use this situation for His purposes so we find in verse 6 that the *ruach of Yehoveh* (the spirit of God) came upon Samson, imbued him with supernatural strength and courage, and with bare hands (using no weapon at all) Samson literally tore the lion apart and killed it.

Let's stop there for a second. Who can imagine fighting a lion under any circumstances let alone without any kind of weapon. But let's also not make this more than it is. The Hebrew word used here for lion is *kephir*. There are 5 Hebrew words for lion, and interestingly they are NOT synonymous. Rather each Hebrew word for lion sets up a hierarchy of the lion's maturity. So we have the word *gur* that means a baby lion (a small cub) and at the other end of the scale is the oldest most mature lion called a *layish*. In between a *gur* and a *layish* are 3 other Hebrew words denoting different stages of the lion's development. *Kephir* is the 2nd youngest stage. So what Samson fought was a mature cub, but not even a young adult lion. So the typical illustrations of a large male lion with a flowing mane is a little over the top.

Since Samson went a different route than his parents, mom and dad didn't know about the adventure with the lion and Samson didn't bring it up. Of course this of itself is going to play in role in what comes a little later.

When they arrived in Timnah all 3 went to the family home of this unnamed Philistine girl and Samson took some time to talk with her. Up to now he had only been struck by her lovely appearance; at this point after getting to know her a bit he also became pleased with her countenance, thus it says that he still liked her.

The next verse skips ahead quite a bit. Some amount of time passes; Samson's parents had apparently met their Philistine counterparts, marriage terms were agreed to and the betrothal period began. How long this is we don't know because undoubtedly it was some compromise between whatever the current Hebrew customs and the Philistine's ways were

So verse 8 has Samson returning to Timnah to claim his bride (again his parents took a different route as they approached Timnah's vineyards. Along the way he of course remembered about the lion and went over to the same spot to see if the remains of it were still there and sure enough they were. The CJB says it was a lion carcass; that's pretty accurate. The thing we have to get in mind is that this was NOT a sun-bleached lion skeleton lying there; rather it was more like a mummy. It was summer in Canaan, hot and dry. And when at that time of year an animal died it was quite usual for scavengers to do their jobs to empty it of its internal organs; but at the same time the sun and lack of humidity had the effect of rapidly dehydrating the remaining skin and flesh in the same way meat or fish destined for food was commonly flayed and laid open to the sun to become dried and preserved for later use.

It was inside the cavity of the lion where skin was still stretched over the skeleton that a colony of bees had established a hive. Honey was a prized food; there wasn't a great deal of it (bees were not cultivated in hive farms like they are now), it offered a wonderful and rare flavor, and so Samson was quick to take advantage. He scraped out of the carcass as much as could into his hands, ate some, and then later offered some to his folks when he met up with them again. We're told that he withheld the little matter of where he got it: from inside the dried up remains of a lion.

A lion was an unclean animal. Worse, this was a DEAD unclean animal. So while Samson didn't seem to be bothered by the prospect of either contact with this ritually impure object nor eating food taken from it, his parents would NOT have eaten the honey had they known its source. Let me repeat something from last week: technically a Nazarite is not to touch a dead body under any circumstance. He couldn't even prepare and/or bury his own parents if it became necessary. However Tradition had developed that (in general) a Nazarite was not to contact any dead thing, including an animal. Apparently they drew the line at unclean animals otherwise sacrificing and eating meat was out, and there is no record of a Nazir requirement to become a vegetarian or that the sacrificial requirements were held in abeyance until their vow period expired.

Still it's unimaginable that Samson's parents would have eaten honey taken from the corpse of a dead unclean animal like a lion. This shows once again how Samson paid little attention to the Laws of Moses or even Hebrew traditions if it didn't suit him and really didn't care too much about the feelings and concerns of others or if what he did negatively affected them; this apparently included even his own parents.

In verse 10 we're told that the marriage ceremony began as Samson's father went down to greet Samson's bride-to-be. No doubt the situation was cordial; there is no hint that this was tense situation or even particularly uncomfortable for either of the two families. In many ways this is just another subtle picture of how familiar and at ease God's people had become with God's enemies, and helps us to understand why YHWH was going to do something about this ridiculous state of coziness between the two sides that ought not to exist.

We're told that a banquet was served and that this was the way that young men used to go about a marriage ceremony. The young men are referring to Philistine young men; this banquet was a Philistine tradition not Hebrew. Since Samson was in Philistia, marrying a Philistine girl, there weren't any of Samson's Israelite buddies with him. So out of hospitality the bride's family provided 30 Philistine men as "companions" for the groom. I suspect that Samson had at the least some familiarity with many of these men, and especially the best man. Apparently a Philistine wedding ceremony was much like a modern western bachelor's party (wonder how the bride felt about that?) Only this party was a 7-day long affair!

Well as you can imagine, without TV or a DJ, a 7-day long anything could get a bit boring so some kind of entertainment was called for. And since the nearest city of any size was Ashkelon, it's not feasible that the guests traveled back and forth to the feast from home each day; rather the wedding guests stayed there the whole time. In those days (and for hundreds of years into the future) a favorite party activity was the telling of riddles. And along with the riddles came drinking copious amounts of alcohol. Now there is no statement that Samson drank, but if he had not it would have been a serious breach of hospitality and protocol. Plus, strictly speaking, a Nazarite was only supposed to stay away from grape-based alcohol (even though Tradition made it all alcohol) and many kinds of alcohol were made from grain. In any case there are few scholars (but the majority of Rabbis) who try to make the case that Samson avoided the alcohol; it would have gone against everything we are told about his character to think he didn't partake a least a little.

The bridegroom does his duty to entertain the folks and offers a riddle. And to go along with it is a wager: if the 30 male guests can decipher the answer Samson promises to buy them each, "30 linen shirts and 30 changes of good clothing". Varying bible versions offer different translations about this clothing, but the Hebrew helps to explain it. The so-called shirts are in Hebrew ***sedinim***, and these are rectangular pieces of fine linen that are often used as soft undergarments (you can imagine how itchy and scratchy most outer clothing was back then). The "changes of good clothing" is in Hebrew ***chalipha*** and it means a festive garment; kind of what we might call our Sunday best reserved for special occasions. The point is that these were expensive garments, and so Samson was really sticking his neck out. If he lost fair and square one wonders where he would have acquired the funds for so many of these costly items. Naturally part of the bargain was that if the 30 men couldn't guess the answer to the riddle by the end of the 7-day marriage feast then they each owed Samson a ***sedin*** and a ***chalipha***. Samson was not planning on losing because in reality the riddle was not a fair one, but his guests accepted the challenge and the dye was cast.

"Out of the eater came food; out of the strong came sweetness" was the riddle to be solved. This is referring to the lion Samson killed, and the honey that the bees formed inside of it. But

who could ever guess such a thing? This is nothing that logic or deductive reasoning or cleverness could ever penetrate; one had to be there at the lion incident to have any idea what Samson was talking about. Solving such a so-called riddle is impossible. Here again is Samson's character flaws showing themselves; he has organized a sucker bet at his own wedding, taking advantage of his own guests. Not very nice. But of course this is more or less what the Lord God had planned all along as a means to stoke the fires of unrest between the Philistines and the Israelites.

Verse 14 tells us that after 3 days of all 30 men working together to solve this unsolvable riddle, they knew they had been had. Yet apparently they continued to try various methods to find the answer. Unsuccessful, they were beginning to realize that not only had Samson made a fool out of them but that they were going to leave the wedding feast a little poorer than they had arrived. This infuriated them. So they confronted Shimshon's bride and demanded that she pry the solution out of her husband.

There is a problem with the timing here, and we'll not go into depth to solve it for it would take quite a while to deal with so I'll just summarize. Notice that it says that after 3 days they had guessed the answer to the riddle, but then on the 7th day they went to Samson's bride. Next we see Samson's bride ask, Samson refuses, and then gives in because it says she had cried for the entire 7 days. By the 7th day Samson finally broke down and told her. So we see a bunch of timing conflicts here don't we? We know, for instance, that it was sometime AFTER the 3rd day of the 7-day feast that the 30 men approached the bride, yet it says she cried for all 7 days (presumably to get Samson to finally tell her the answer). And then we're told that before 7 days ended they appropriated the solution from the bride and gave it to Samson.

Here's the thing: the problem can be solved if one understands that we probably have a contextual mixing of the same term meaning two different things. The term is "7 days". 7 days was the length of the wedding feast but we have no idea what day of the week it began. 7 days is also how long the girl cried. And "the 7th day" is also a common biblical term meaning the Sabbath (the Sabbath is of course the 7th and final day of the week). Thus very likely it was NOT on the 7th day of the wedding banquet that the men came to the girl to convince her to help them solve the riddle, but rather it was referring to the 7th day of a standard week (the Shabbat). I'll let you take it from there (for time's sake).

In any case Samson didn't want to tell the girl, at least partly because he undoubtedly felt she might divulge the answer. After all, despite the fact that they were in the marriage process, her family was Philistines and her culture was Philistine and all of her friends were Philistine. The pressure would have been too much for her NOT to help out those who she had been closest to all of her life. In fact Samson says that not even his own parents know about the answer to the riddle. Yes, and for good reason; they weren't present when Samson discovered the honey, Samson gave them honey from an unclean lion carcass, and if they ever found out they'd be furious with Samson because they'd have to go through a long and costly process of ritual purification, and the mere thought of what they had ingested would have turned their stomachs. But this also proved to be an important tool for the Lord to use in His determination to undermine the peace process between the Philistines and the Israelites.

Samson's bride's tears finally had they're desired effect and Samson told her the answer to the riddle. Men, I think we can all identify with this. When my wife cries for even a few minutes I'm ready to do anything to stop the flow of tears! Men just have no idea what to do with a crying woman (and I'm pretty sure women are BORN knowing that). Now my wife has never cried for one whole day, let alone for 7 days as in our story of the wedding. So I think we can cut Samson some slack.

Unfortunately the girl instantly went to the 30 men and told them the riddle's solution. Just moments before the end of the 7th day of the feast (that's the idea in verse 18 when it says, "before sundown on the 7th day"), when the time would have ended for the men to declare the answer or owe Samson the clothing, they went to him and gave him the answer.

Samson may be an incorrigible but he was no dummy; he knew immediately that his wife had betrayed him. Thus he told the men in kind of a riddle form that he knew what they did (after all only he and his bride knew the answer). Thus the words, "If you hadn't plowed with my young cow, you wouldn't have solved my riddle now."

Let me detour momentarily. All throughout this story (at least since the beginning of the banquet) this girl has been called Samson's wife, but that isn't exactly correct. The Hebrew term being translated is *ishsheh* and it can mean girl, woman, or wife. The meaning is derived from the context. The problem in this story is that the whole wedding process was interrupted before the end of the 7th day. But more important this rift between Samson and his bride seems to have happened BEFORE they had sexually consummated their marriage. This is key; because by Hebrew standards this consummation IS the act of marriage. No consummation, no marriage. Thus the ancient Hebrew marriage ceremony consisted of a gathering of friends and family, a brief ceremony officiated by the parents, and then everyone watched as the couple went into their home to consummate their union. I've told you the story of the marriage cloth that was used as proof of the consummation (you can go back and get a detailed explanation from Torah lessons); the cloth was given to the mother of the bride for safekeeping because in effect this was the equivalent of a signed marriage certificate.

The point is this: by everything in the scriptures, there was no consummation of this marriage. Thus the Samson and his bride were never officially married. Thus to translate the term *ishsheh* as "wife" is a misnomer. So why do we find it this way? The answer is that the Rabbis (especially those who helped to create the Greek Septuagint) wanted to make Samson out as a great and near perfect man, rather than the seriously flawed man that he was. Thus they concocted all kinds of fanciful and unsubstantiated excuses and scenarios that changed the plain meaning of the holy texts. For instance they claimed that before Samson married this girl, she converted to Judaism. Then they claim that Samson and this girl were legally married in correct Torah fashion, thus this girl WAS his wife. The next chapter will bring up this issue in more detail and so we'll examine it a little more at that time.

Well Samson was beside himself in anger; his betrothed had betrayed him and (just as bad) somehow he had to come up with 30 sets of clothing for his guests as their prize for "solving" the riddle. Rather than just tell the men that their method of getting the answer negated what he owed them, he determined he would meet his obligation. I suspect that had he argued

against this, his own guilt as forming a riddle that was unfair and only he could possibly know the answer to would have become all the more apparent. So boiling with rage he went to Ashkelon (about 20 miles away) and proceeded to kill 30 male citizens of Ashkelon in order to take their clothes from them and give them to his wedding guests. Understand: these men he killed had no connection to the wedding. By all accounts these were random killings, but undoubtedly Samson picked men who possessed the special kind of clothing the bet required. He took the clothes and gave them to the men he owed them to, then went to his father's house in Tzarah of Judah.

Back in Timnah, his wife and her family waited for Samson to return, but he didn't. What a terrible insult to her family and what a dilemma. Was this girl married or not married? Would Samson return and complete the marriage process or was this girl to remain in limbo? After some time passed (we don't know if it was days or months), the girl's father gave her in marriage to Samson's best man.

Wow, what a mess. Let's end today by backing up a couple of verses to verse 19. Verse 19 states that the Spirit of Yehoveh came over Samson as he went to Ashkelon with murder on his mind; and the Ruach gave Samson a burst of supernatural strength that allowed him to go through the city and kill these random Philistine men in order to take their clothing from them. This reminds us that the Lord God was behind all of this. Yes, Samson's own evil inclinations made him the impetuous bully (with anger management issues) that he was; but the Lord unapologetically used this for His purposes.

Samson's rash decision to marry the Philistine girl; the girl's decision to betray her fiancé to the 30 wedding guests; and then her father's decision to give her to another man after Samson took off, now made reconciliation impossible. Samson's war against the Philistines was about to begin in earnest. By the way: the Rabbi's handle all this (and what is about to come) by explaining that Samson's so-called "wife" now gave up her Judaism and returned to the religion of her Philistine family.

We'll start chapter 15 next time.