

WHEN WILL WE EVER LEARN

Judges 13:1-14

In 1956 Pete Seeger wrote a protest song entitled "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" There was a plaintive refrain that has become a common place question in our culture and that is "When will they ever learn?" When we look at the history of the nation of Israel from the time they entered the Promised Land until the desolation of the destruction of the Temple and the scattering of the Jews by the Roman in A.D. 70, we would be prompted to ask "When will they ever learn?"

The succession of events of learning and forgetting the lessons learned and slipping into disobedience was never more pronounced than in the time of the Judges. The silliness of the cycle pattern of deliverance and then drifting away from God plagued the Israelites for hundreds of years.

A plethora of judges paraded across the stage of history of the nation in cycles corresponding to about two or three generations. Because the fathers failed to teach their children as they were admonished to do by Moses in Deuteronomy 6, the following generation would drift away from God and take on the pallid complexion of the pagan culture and judgment would come from God by the hand of the very culture which the children of Israel embraced. The next generation would become tired of the persecution and would seek to return to God and He would raise up a leader they would be delivered and enjoy the blessings of obedience for a generation and then the cycle would start over again. When will they ever learn?

These cycles which we can so clearly see in the case of Israel's history are NOT unique to the Israelites. What we commonly called the Western Culture of which our nation is a part has gone through and continues to go through similar cycles. We are in one of the cycles right now. Our society is suffering at the hands of the permissive culture that we have embrace over the past two generations. This is a particularly troublesome cycle in that those in the government have not remained neutral in the culture war but have embraced godlessness as a stated policy and any attempt to called people back from the brink of destruction by appealing to the precepts and principles of the Kingdom of God (which is the only salvation possible) is expressly prohibited. Consequently, the depth of the depravity of the cycle will be very great and the outcome for our culture will be as that of the Jews when the weeping pronouncement by Jesus on the hill overlooking Jerusalem was "Your house is left unto you desolate." When will WE ever learn?

1 ¶ 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. (Judges 13:1)

After the victory over the Ammonites and the confrontation with the Tribe of Ephraim, Jephthah did not live very long. He led Israel for 6 years and was followed by three other Judges: Ibzan (7 years), Elon (10 years) and Abdon (8 years). The oppression at the hand of the Philistines probably started when Israel was in a greatly weakened condition because of fighting among themselves. However, weakness was not the cause of the domination of the Philistines but was merely a facilitating condition. The cause was the return to idolatry of the Israelites.

How does this apply to us today in the church? It would seem that Christians spend more time criticizing and pecking at other Christians than they do in fighting evil in the world. This weakens the Church (universal) and is a facilitating condition. However, the real cause of the persecution of the Church and the rising influence of the world system is an unconscious endorsement of secular humanism by individual Christians and by entire denominations (large groups). This is the idolatry of the modern times in which we live.

A certain man of Zorah, named Manoah, from the clan of the Danites, had a wife who was sterile and remained childless. The angel of the LORD appeared to her and said, "You are sterile and childless, but you are going to conceive and have a son. (Judges 13:2-3)

In Judges 10:10, the people of Israel cried out to God "We have sinned against you, forsaking

our God and serving the Baals." Upon that realization and confession, God raised up a leader (Jephthah) to bring deliverance. In Judges 6:6 we see, "Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the LORD for help." The result was the call of Gideon and the victory over the Midianites. In Judges 4:3 we see a familiar theme: Because he (Sisera) had nine hundred iron chariots and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the LORD for help. In Judges 3:15: "Again the Israelites cried out to the LORD, and he gave them a deliverer—Ehud," In Judges 3:9 we read "But when they cried out to the LORD, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, who saved them."

Do you see a pattern? Drifting away, oppression, cry for help, deliverance. Now, let's look at verses 1, 2 and 3 from Chapter 13 again. The drifting away is there, the oppression is there; however, the cry for help is missing. What is happening? God is acting sovereignly on behalf of His people. While God acts on our behalf many times, the more notable times are associated with something miraculous happening. Many of the better known events in the historical account of God dealing with man relate a miracle of some importance occurring.

What is the miracle that is about to happen in the life of Manoah and his wife? A woman who was sterile was going to have a baby. This family was of the Tribe of Dan and this tribe was geographically situated near the coast where the Philistines lived. The territory of Dan was quite small and was not politically significant. It was situated between the land of Judah and Ephraim. There is no indication that the family of Manoah had any particular clout or influence. Likely, they were just common, ordinary people. Why is this significant? Simply because God chooses and uses common, ordinary people to accomplish His purposes.

God does not act without a purpose and a reason for what He does. We would say that He is NOT a capricious God. God has a purpose, He has a plan and everything He does works toward the accomplishment of that purpose and plan.

Is there a lesson for us as a church or even as individuals? What are we trying to accomplish as a body of believers (church) in this time and place? What are you and I (individuals) trying to accomplish in our lives in this time and place? Maybe a better question is "What is God trying to accomplish in this church and in your life?" The follow-up question would be, "Are we working with or against God in what He wants to do?"

If there was to be a miraculous birth, then there must be a reason for it and we find that reason in the rest of the story as related by the angel of the Lord.

Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink and that you do not eat anything unclean, because you will conceive and give birth to a son. No razor may be used on his head, because the boy is to be a Nazarite, set apart to God from birth, and he will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines." (Judges 13:4-5)

It would seem that perhaps God was continuing to establish a pattern of miraculous births from which leaders or deliverers would result. The births of Isaac, Samuel, Joseph, John the Baptist, and Jesus could be added to the list.

When God chooses a person for a special assignment He sometimes imposes restrictions on behavior and diet. The reason for the absence of alcohol can be understood because of the debilitating affects it has on a person. Not cutting one's hair could be simply to set the person apart from others. In fact, the word Nazarite literally means consecrated. The specifics of the consecration can be found in a passage from Numbers 6:3-4 (It is interesting to notice that the mother was to also abstain from wine and other fermented drink as well as from anything unclean during the pregnancy. This practice of the expectant mother being careful of her diet during the pregnancy is getting a lot more attention in the past several years than it used to get.)

He shall separate himself from wine and strong drink, and shall drink no vinegar of wine,

or vinegar of strong drink, neither shall he drink any liquor of grapes, nor eat moist grapes, or dried. All the days of his separation shall he eat nothing that is made of the vine tree, from the kernels even to the husk. Numbers 6:3-4

The word Nazarite sounds similar to the word Nazarene that was used in reference to Jesus. There is no relationship to the meaning of the two words. The word Nazarene was to imply that Jesus came from Nazareth. That name is a derivation of the Hebrew word “netser” which means spout or branch. Christ was specifically referred to by this reference in Isaiah 11:1 *And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots:*

Back to the word Nazarite: This was typically a voluntary vow taken by a person for a specific period of time. It was offered as a sacrifice unto God. There are remnants of this practice happening in our time. The observance of Lent is similar to the temporary vow of a Nazarite. Most of the time the vow is taken as a deliberate choice of a responsible individual. You could call this a “living sacrifice.”

There are three cases mentioned in the Bible of perpetual (or lifetime) Nazarite vows: Samson, Samuel, and John the Baptist. In all three of these cases, the condition was not chosen by the affected individual. For Samson and for John the Baptist, the call was imposed by God. For Samuel the vow was made by his mother before she conceived the child. (I’m not really sure I know all the implications and the spiritual significance of choice versus non-choice.)

Then the woman went to her husband and told him, "A man of God came to me. He looked like an angel of God, very awesome. I didn't ask him where he came from, and he didn't tell me his name. But he said to me, 'You will conceive and give birth to a son. Now then, drink no wine or other fermented drink and do not eat anything unclean, because the boy will be a Nazirite of God from birth until the day of his death.'" (Judges 13:6-7)

The phrase “man of God” was a euphemism for prophet. Manoah’s wife assumed that this messenger was a prophet but she could tell that he was different from any prophet she had ever seen before. Her description was that he “looked like an angel of God.” I’m guessing that he did not have wings and that he did not have a halo. He generally looked like a male human but there was something (an aura?) that was awesome (or terrible, as in the KJV). We can only guess what this appearance factor was that made her think that this un-named individual was an angel or messenger of God. The common notion was that angels were very beautiful, had a shining countenance, and were very majestic. Many commentaries argue that this was a physical appearing of the Lord Jesus in the Old Testament as is the case of other appearances of the “angel of the Lord.”

The fact that she did not ask His name nor inquire about where he was from was likely due to the fear she felt by just being in the presence of the Angel of the Lord. I would imagine that most people would have a sense that they should listen rather than talk in such a situation.

She related to her husband what the angel told her. There are two differences (one minor and the other major) in the accounts given in verse 5 (that spoken by the angel) and verse 7 (that related to Manoah).

The minor difference is that she told Manoah that their son would be a Nazarite from the womb until his death. The extent “until his death” addition was not included in the account in verse 5. This may be a case where an exact quote was not used in the 5th verse and we learn the rest of what was said in the 7th verse. Or it may be that she just assumed that the vow was to be perpetual.

The major difference is seen in the omission of the purpose of the life of Samson - “he will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines.” Why do you suppose she left out that highly significant bit of information? It is likely that if such information ever got to the Philistines that they would have killed her before Samson was born. That such an might happen, one has only to consider what Herod did in Bethlehem after the birth of Jesus.

Then Manoah prayed to the LORD: "O Lord, I beg you, let the man of God you sent to us come again to teach us how to bring up the boy who is to be born." God heard Manoah, and the angel of God came again to the woman while she was out in the field; but her husband Manoah was not with her. The woman hurried to tell her husband, "He's here! The man who appeared to me the other day!" Manoah got up and followed his wife. When he came to the man, he said, "Are you the one who talked to my wife?" "I am," he said. So Manoah asked him, "When your words are fulfilled, what is to be the rule for the boy's life and work?" The angel of the LORD answered, "Your wife must do all that I have told her. She must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, nor drink any wine or other fermented drink nor eat anything unclean. She must do everything I have commanded her." (Judges 13:8-14)

Manoah was eager to do what it took to be obedient to God. He wanted to be taught the specifics of what was required. This willing attitude may have been the very reason God chose this family into which Samson was to be born.

The angel of the Lord did not give Manoah any additional instructions beyond that which he had told Manoah's wife. In fact, He left out the part about the life mission of Samson even though Manoah specifically asked about that in verse 12. The instructions were simple enough and elaborate details were not needed. We need to be obedient to the truth that God has already revealed. The parts of the Bible we don't understand should not concern us so much as the parts we do understand.

Let's look at the life mission for Samson. "He will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines." That is an interesting choice of words. Samson **began** a work that he did not complete. It was not that he failed but that his mission was to begin something that would be carried out by others. The others included the likes of Eli, Samuel, and Saul. It was completed by David.

We could contrast and compare Samson with Jesus. The contrast being that Samson did not keep himself pure and was deceitfully clever; while Jesus was sinless and in Whom there was no guile. Samson only began a work of deliverance while Jesus was the author of the complete salvation of His people out of the hands of all their enemies, sin, Satan and the world. On the comparison side, we see a resemblance between Samson and the Lord Jesus in that what he did he did himself alone after the Spirit of the Lord came upon him. Samson was not the head of an army with forces under him as the other judges. Christ did not have an army but died alone on the cross to bring salvation to all who would follow Him. We see this in Isaiah 63:5

And I looked, and there was none to help; and I wondered that there was none to uphold: therefore mine own arm brought salvation unto me; and my fury, it upheld me.

If the vow of a Nazarite is a living sacrifice and it is to have a purpose and if we are to heed the call of Paul in Roman 12 to present our bodies as living sacrifices, then we would do well to ask: "To what purpose?" Earlier I said God does not act without a purpose and a reason for what He does. We would say that He is NOT a capricious God. God has a purpose, He has a plan and everything He does works toward the accomplishment of that purpose and plan. Just as God called people in the past to a life of consecration (living sacrifice) so that His purposes are accomplished, He is still calling today. I think that Samson knew why he was a Nazarite - consecrated to God - do we? When will we ever learn?